

THE PENITENT

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WITHDRAWN

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CHAPTER I

THE CLOSERIE DE ROS GRIGNON

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THE CLOSERIE DE ROS GRIGNON

ON the threshold of the farm at the top of the hill, a man and a woman were sitting—a very tall man, a very little woman—both of very ancient Breton race. They sat with heads leaning on their hands, and the night had nearly fallen.

A line of crimson, no wider than a spindle, many leagues in length, and merely broken here and there by the distant undulations of the land, revealed the immensity of the horizon before them; but now its light barely touched either the fleecy clouds that streaked the sky or the Forest of Lorges, whose hills and valleys mingled in indistinct waves.

Banks of cloud in the sky, banks of mist amidst the foliage; everything bore the same aspect; everything was asleep, and from time to time there came a waft of pungent scent, the nocturnal breath of the Forest.

At the edge of the wood, some five hundred yards from the house, a piece of waste land showed a brown patch; then there came a lean field of harvested buckwheat, and, still nearer, the stony little hillock, clad with broom, on which stood the Closerie de Ros Grignon.

They were poor. After finishing his term of military service, the man had married the daughter of a sailor, a servant in the parish of Yffiniac, not far from that of Plœuc.

She possessed a few hundred francs, her thrifty savings, and a pair of very bright and innocent black eyes under the tall wings of her cap shaped like the flower of the cyclamen.

As for him, he possessed nothing; how was it possible for a soldier just back from his regiment?

Still, for all that, it was not so much her money which dictated his choice, but because she herself pleased him; and as he was reputed to be a hard worker, and an indefatigable one, he had been able to obtain on lease a few acres of poor land, twenty apple-trees, and a house composed of a stable where

the cow lived, and a room where the family slept, under the same roof of thatch a yard thick and brown with moss—in a word, the Closerie de Ros Grignon.

Nevertheless it did not pay.

In the six years of his marriage three children had been born to him, of whom Joël, the youngest, was now five months old. In her times of weakness the mother could give but little help to her husband in the tilling of the soil, the sowing, the weeding or the harvesting; and the oats sold badly, the buckwheat was almost all consumed in the house, and the shadow of the Forest, the deep-seated roots of the oak-trees and the furze-bushes, made the crops wretchedly poor.

The night promised to be damp and quiet, like so many nights towards the end of September. From the room behind Jean Louarn and his wife came the regular creak of the cradle which Noémi, a little girl of five, was rocking by pulling on a cord, till Joël fell asleep.

But they did not move; with vacant eyes they seemed to be watching the lessening of the line of light above the Forest.

Drops of dew, slipping from the thatch-ridge, fell upon the man's neck, but he took no heed.

They simply rested, breathing in the cool air, barren of thought, but for that ever present haunting dread of poverty, which, borne too long, is now no longer shared but endured by each alone.

The creaking of the cradle stopped, and the child, but half asleep, began to cry.

“ Pull, Noémi ! Why don't you pull ? ”

There was no answer, but the soft sound of the wicker began once more.

Then the father, rousing himself from the dream that had held him, said slowly :

“ We must sell the cow.”

“ Yes,” answered the woman ; “ we must sell her.”

It was not the first time they had talked of taking to market the sole beast in the stable ; but they had decided not to do so, hoping for some other means of salvation—what, they didn't know !

“ We must sell her before the winter,” Louarn added.

Then he fell silent. Little Joël was asleep ;

no sound broke the stillness of the Closerie or of the vast space around.

The last gleam of sunset was now but a thread; it was the hour when the beasts of prey, the wolves, the foxes, the prowling martens, leave their thickets and, with outstretched necks, scenting the night, shake their paws and come out into the open to trot along the narrow tracks.

“Good-evening,” said a hoarse voice.

The man and woman got up with a start, and instinctively Louarn made a step forward to put himself between his wife and the approaching figure.

For a moment he stood, bent forwards, trying to pierce the gloom of the stony slope, his arms rigid by his sides, ready for attack; but in the feeble ray of light which escaped from the door and made a faint glimmer upon the mist, appeared a head, followed by the big body of a man made still bigger by the folds of a smock.

“Don’t be afraid, Louarn; it’s me; I’ve brought a letter.”

“It’s no time to be upon the road, all the same,” said Louarn.

“ You live so far off ! ” answered the postman ; “ I came on after collecting. Here it is.”

The farmer stretched out his hand, and looked at the envelope with a sad laugh. What could one letter more or less from Lawyer Guillon, Mademoiselle Penhoat’s collector of rents, matter to him ?

Since he couldn’t pay, it was only a useless bit of writing.

“ Will you come in ? ” he said ; “ won’t you have a mug of cider ? ”

“ No, not to-night ; some other time.”

The round smock disappeared with three strides of its wearer, for the fog was thickening.

“ Let’s go in,” said Louarn.

While he was closing the door, and thrusting in the wooden bolt with its point shining from long use, his wife, more eager than he to look at the letter, picked up from the floor the candle stuck in a bottle neck, put it on the table, and bent over it with glistening eyes.

“ Tell me, Jean, where does the letter come from ? ”

Standing on the other side of the table, he

turned the envelope over and over in his hands, held it close to his face, which was long, thin, and clean-shaven but for an inch of whisker close to his hair, and not recognizing Maître Guillon's writing :

" Here," he said, " you read it, Donatienne. It isn't from him ; I can't understand printed writing."

And in his turn he gazed at the little Breton woman, reading quickly, following the lines with swaying head, blushing, trembling, and ending by saying as she raised her eyes, wet with tears, yet smiling :

" They want me to go as wet-nurse ! " Louarn's face gloomed ; his thin cheeks, the colour of the poor soil he worked in, sank.

" Who ? " he asked.

" Oh ! some people, I don't know who ; their name's here. But the doctor's the one at Saint-Brieuc."

" And when must you go ? "

She looked down at the table, seeing how greatly Louarn was upset.

" To-morrow morning. They say I am to take the first train. Really I had left off expecting it, *mon homme !* "

In fact they had thought before Joël's birth that Donatienne might perhaps find a situation as wet-nurse, like so many relations and neighbours in their native province, and the young woman had been to see the doctor at Saint-Brieuc, who had taken down her name and address.

But eight months having gone by bringing no answer, they had supposed their application to have been forgotten. The husband alone had mentioned it once or twice, saying in harvest-time :

"It's very lucky no one wanted you, Donatienne. How could I have managed by myself ? "

"I had quite left off expecting it !" repeated the little woman, her face lighted up from beneath by the candle's light; "*I am* surprised, really ! "

And despite herself her heart began to beat quicker and the blood to mount to her cheeks; the bit of paper upon which her eyes were fixed, seeing nothing of the words it bore, brought her a vague sense of joy of which she felt ashamed; it seemed to offer her a truce to her misery, deliverance from her lot as

the wife of a peasant, obliged to feed the man and to be everlastingly busy with the care of the children and the animals.

The weight of fatigue and weariness that crushed them both seemed to be a little lifted from her shoulders.

The stories told by the women of Plœuc—the way they were loaded with attentions in the towns; rapid visions of embroidered linen, silken ribbons, heaps of money; the proud thought, too, that the doctor was sending her to a fine house in Paris—all this coursed confusedly through her mind and upset her.

She turned towards the two cradles, side by side, standing by the bed with its curtains of green serge, and made as if to tuck in Lucienne and Joël's sheets.

"Of course it will be sad, *mon homme*; but, you know, it won't last for ever."

He uttered no word in answer, and no shadow but her own wavered on the wall; she heard two drops of water fall from the thatched roof upon the flag-stones outside.

"And then I shall be earning money," she went on, "and I'll send it to you. These

people must be rich; perhaps they'll give me some frocks for the children—they want them so badly——”

Once more silence fell upon the house's single room till it seemed a dead thing, like the woods, the wastes heavy with the dews of the September night.

Donatienne realized that the feeling of joy she had not been able to hide was gradually fading away, and that there need now be nothing in her manner offensive to her husband. She looked at Louarn.

He had not stirred; the candle's light shone full upon his blue eyes, which, beneath his bushy eyebrows, were like patches of wan mist, and wore the distressed look of a poor creature bewildered by a grief too great to be borne.

They followed all Donatienne's movements, heedless of her smile, or her blush, or her lingering about the cradles; they followed her with despairing thoughts, seeing nothing beyond, as if she had been already but a distant vision, league upon league away from him. Sailors wear the same look when on the horizon a sail sinks into the boundless ocean.

“ Jean ! ” she said ; “ Jean Louarn ! ”

He came slowly round the table to her beside Joël's cradle, where she stood motionless ; he took her hand and together, through the gloom, they looked down at the sleeping children, their fair heads turned towards each other, and half hidden by the corners of the pillows they pressed.

“ You'll look after them well, won't you ? ” she said. “ He's so little, and Lucienne's so mischievous ; you never know what she's after—she runs so quick, and I'm often nervous about the well. You'll tell whoever comes——”

The man nodded.

“ I was just thinking,” Donatienne went on ; “ to-morrow morning you can go and fetch Annette Domerc from Plœuc. I think she would be willing to be your servant. Do you think that would suit you ? ”

Louarn shrugged his high shoulders.

“ What does that matter ? ” he said ; “ I'll try it.”

“ And I'm sure it will be all right ! you mustn't take it so hard. All the other women hereabouts do the same. I've even been

longer in getting it than the others. I'm twenty-four—think of that ! ”

She went on talking rapidly, giving pieces of advice he did not hear, and uttering the usual set phrases of consolation which never console.

Then her clear Breton voice failed her ; her breast heaved beneath her velvet-braided bodice ; she realized that there was still something left unsaid, and murmured :

“ My poor Jean, I know, I know ! ”

He flung his arm round her waist, and holding her slender form against his breast, led her to the recess of the chimney to the left, where stood a bench for winter evenings.

He let himself fall upon the bench, and seating her on his knee and drawing her small head upon his shoulder, he held her in a tight embrace, as he remembered he had done on one of the first evenings of their marriage, finding now but one word to express his anguish, as he then found but one word to express his love :

“ Wife ! Wife ! ”

He did not kiss her face, nor even try to look into it ; but with all his giant strength,

tiller of the soil as he was, he clasped to his heart the woman who was his own, while the supreme tenderness of the fast approaching farewell flooded his whole being.

“ O wife ! ” he said once more.

And that piteous cry spoke the passion of his soul, and its jealous doubts, and the misery he felt at the sight of all the objects shown by the feeble rays of the candle—the cradles, the bed, the table, the clothes-chest, yes, even the stable, whence came at intervals the sound of a heavy body rubbing against the boards.

Without her, how sad everything would be !

Above them gaped the wide chimney, black with soot, the mist slowly creeping down it.

Donatienne had tried to free herself, but he would not let her go ; and now she herself was seized by a dread of the unknown.

“ If I only knew where you’re going ! ” Louarn had said.

But of that they were equally ignorant ; she was to go and he to stay ; and no effort of memory, nothing either could recall of barrack-talk or gossip of Plœuc women

brought to them any idea, however imperfect, where to-morrow the mother of Noémi, Lucienne and Joël would be.

A long time passed; then the letter they had left upon the table was caught by a gust of wind and slipped off.

Then Louarn, through the chimney-opening, noticed the lighter colour of the sky.

“The moon is rising over the woods,” he said; “it’s past ten o’clock, Donatienne.”

They left the chimney-corner, and he began to undress for bed, while she went to little Joël, who had awakened.

And soon the Night went her way over the five sleepers in Ros Grignon; one by one her stars travelled above the mist-drenched Forest; above the hillock that rose from the harvested fields, and passed to other fields, other houses, lost amongst the nameless wastes. It was the dead of night—deserted roads, closed windows, the sound of the distant swell of the sea reaching even to the villages farthest inland.

All human joys slumbered, and well-nigh all human sorrows, even the hard struggle for life. Only along the coasts of the Breton

peninsula the lights of the ships fell athwart each other in the darkness. The earth, for a time, had ceased to bewail herself.

Jean Louarn's homestead was silent.

The man slept uneasily, a dream-shudder shaking him at moments; by his side, slender and rosy-cheeked, lay Donatienne, looking, when a ray of moonlight fell across the bed, like the little figures of brides dressed in shells they sell in the small shops in the town below.

CHAPTER II

THE DEPARTURE

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THE DEPARTURE

THERE was no brightness at dawn; the cloud-covered sky grew somewhat paler, but so little that one could not distinguish the spot where the sun had risen.

An hour earlier, Jean Louarn had left Ros Grignon for the town of Plœuc to get some one to lend him a cart and to fetch the servant, Annette Domerc.

Donatienne was dressing herself, while Noémi, who was now beginning to be of use to her mother, was doing the same.

Sitting on the edge of her bed, locks of hair from her dishevelled head falling into her half-shut eyes, the little girl kept pausing in the pulling on of her stockings or fastening her frock while, with drooping head, overcome by sleep, she tried to keep her balance.

The mother, already dressed, stood gazing

at the three children one after the other without a word. Mother-love had deluged her spirit and seized upon her whole being when Louarn had said :

“ It’s five o’clock—the dawn has come.”

The thought that she was about to forsake these three creatures, born of her, above all that last, not yet weaned, tore her heart. She gazed at them with a secret dread that perhaps she might never see them again, or at least, find one less when she returned. Which ?

Such fears must not be dwelt on ; each child as she looked at it in turn seemed to be the one threatened by that vague presentiment.

After a while she went to the chest where she kept her own and her children’s change of clothes—an armful of woollen garments and a little coarse linen—and hastily packed up an old petticoat, a shawl, a chemise and two caps, in a towel which she fastened together with two pins. That was all she took away with her ; the women of the countryside had advised her to leave everything else at home, the gentlefolks gave what

was wanting. Even women less poor than she was did the same.

“Hark!” she said, intently listening.

Noémi, running up, stopped short; there was the sound of wheels coming up to Ros Grignon, but the driver had still to cross the bit of stony, newly-made road, some hundreds of yards from the farmstead, and Donatienne had time to finish dressing.

She looked very nice in her best dress of many-pleated black cloth, her white chemisette, cut low at the throat and back, and her neat roll of fair hair under the butterfly-wings of her cap.

Her husband entered, followed by a puny, round-shouldered girl, whose light-coloured eyes almost matched her brown skin, and who was seventeen, though she looked two years younger.

“Good-morning, Maîtresse Louarn,” she said.

Donatienne made no answer. Two tears, so large that they blinded her, had come into her eyes.

She kissed Joël, who did not stir; then Lucienne, who turned over in her cradle;

she took Noémi, who came up to her, wondering at the tears she could not understand, into her arms.

“My little girl, my dear little girl, you’ll take care, too, won’t you, of your brother and sister? Don’t take them too far away from the house. I shall come back—good-bye.”

She put the child down, picked up her bundle of clothes and a blue cotton umbrella, passed in front of the bewildered servant, and climbed into the cart while Louarn held the horse’s bridle.

Another minute and they were descending the slope; under the thatch the door looked like a black hole framing within its gloom a little brown figure, the fast-fading vision of a child.

A turn in the road soon hid Ros Grignon, and Donatienne was looking first on the uninteresting property of her neighbours, then on that of unknown people, and finally, on trees and hollow roads of which she knew nothing. Louarn seemed entirely taken up with driving.

They were making for l’Hermitage station,

the nearest to Ros Grignon, driving through the clinging morning mist which hung so low that the tops of the oaks and apple-trees seemed to be tangled in smoke.

On a slope some short distance from the town, Jean Louarn bent towards his wife and kissed her on the forehead.

“ You’ll write to me,” he said, “ so that I may know where you are. I shall be terribly anxious about you, Donatienne.”

“ Of course,” replied the young woman; “ and you’ll send me all the news, won’t you ? ”

She did not kiss him, hindered by the austere traditions of Brittany and by the fear of eyes peeping from behind the bushes.

The cart stopped at the station as the 9.30 train from Pontivy came in. There was only just time to run to the ticket window, the man carrying the white bundle, the woman struggling to open the purse with its tarnished brass clasps.

They rushed through the waiting-room, bumping against corners, though neither was over-loaded ; Donatienne climbed into a third-class carriage where a porter was holding a door open.

“ Good-bye ! ” said Louarn.

She did not hear him. He saw the pretty rosy face, the brown eyes, the fluttering wings of the cap, pass behind the glittering windows of the carriage, and stood motionless on the platform, watching the swift flight of the train that was carrying Donatienne away.

CHAPTER III
THE ROAD TO PARIS

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THE ROAD TO PARIS

HE came back alone, thinking of her.

For her part, Donatienne, who had thrown herself into a corner, her head turned towards the landscape, her eyes full of tears, was pretty soon interested in the talk—in French or Breton—going on around her, and in the names of the first stations after l'Hermitage as they were shouted out along the train.

People got into the carriage of whom she knew something, or else she could decide from what district they came, sometimes by the women's head-dress, sometimes by the way in which the men's jackets were braided or embroidered.

A woman sitting beside her, who wore the Lamballe cap, asked her if she were going far.

"As far as Paris," said Donatienne.

"To be a wet-nurse, perhaps?"

“ Yes; I’ve left my three children, Noémi, Lucienne and Joël. He’s not very big yet, as you may suppose.”

She described them all to the sympathizing woman, and felt the better for the talk with another mother, who could understand.

The novelty of it all interested her, too, and gave her many opportunities for wonder, considering her absolute ignorance, having never seen anything but a corner of the district of Yffiniac and another of the district of Plœuc.

She noticed, for instance, that the farther they got from Ros Grignon, the stronger built were the cattle, and that there was less gorse and more hawthorn hedges.

At Rennes she had to wait three hours. A woman, seeing that she was already weary and giddy with the motion of the train, took her to get a glass of milk in a cheap restaurant near the station,—a fat, jovial, wrinkled old woman, one of that kindly, vulgar sort that judge of people’s honesty by their looks and give help without thought of profit, because they can’t help it.

They visited a church together and the

public gardens, and when they parted, each felt a sort of affection for the other. Donatienne had a vague sense of having kissed her dear familiar Brittany and said good-bye to it, when, on getting into the train, she left the old woman shedding tears over the lot of this young stranger venturing so far from the Breton land.

The region of small, sloping meadows bordered with elms, and fields of buckwheat divided by apple-trees, was soon passed, and the train was running through the rich lands of Mayenne and la Sarthe. Donatienne, her head against the window, gazed at them absorbed in the sad thoughts they suggested of other things she had always known.

But when two-thirds of the interminable journey were gone, night fell. The purple mists which since the morning had hung like a crown along the horizon, all at once closed in on every side, drawing their circle ever nearer, and surrounding the train as it rushed along at its highest speed.

Then Donatienne felt she was losing the last occupation for her eyes and her mind; she could not reason about her terror; she cast

a frightened look at her chance companions, and then quickly turned her eyes again to the shadow-invaded fields.

She reckoned that now only four lengths of hedge were visible; now but three; then only a narrow strip beside the line. She endeavoured to make out the shape of the few habitations scattered in the darkness and shown by the light from low-placed windows, and wished she could go into one of them and find herself all at once sheltered in some warm room amongst those who sat together there.

At last she could stand it no longer; she shut her eyes, thinking with terror of the long way she had still to go—through the night—amongst chance companions, shaken like herself and dazed with the jolting of the carriage.

When she opened her eyes again, at the other end of the seat, under the dim light of the lamp, she saw a young woman holding on her knee by one arm a little white bundle. Her skirt was turned up into thick folds round her waist, and two fingers of the other hand still held an open newspaper which the traveller had tried to read, but which,

little by little, had dropped towards the bundle and now nearly covered it.

Donatienne got up and drew near once or twice, but was afraid. The stranger raised her head, a little alarmed at first; then her look softened and she smiled at Donatienne's youthful face and countrified cap. Guessing at the unasked question, she laid down the paper, and said:

"It's my child—a little girl; she's been asleep since le Mans."

"I'm a mother, too," said Donatienne; "I'm going to Paris as a wet-nurse."

She took the doctor's letter from her bodice.

"Oh!" said the young woman; "Boulevard Malesherbes! They must be rich people."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, that's one of the finest quarters of Paris. You're lucky!"

"And you?" asked Donatienne; "are you going to Paris, too?"

"No—close here, to Versailles."

"Perhaps you're going to meet your husband?"

The stranger hesitated for a moment, then said in the same very sweet voice, only a little lower :

“ I have no husband.”

They were both silent then, as though the words had been a sort of plaintive mutual farewell, and they made no further attempt to speak to each other.

Donatienne went back to her corner, so absorbed by the new ideas struggling in her mind that she did not even notice the stranger get out at the Versailles station.

Of the little confidence which had touched her for a moment, there was left but one thing, growing larger and larger and filling her with proud delight—the idea of Paris now so near and of the wealth that would at last surround her.

She was close now to that mysterious great city, already showing proof of its nearness in the crimson glow that hung in the sky in front of her, and in the thousands of gas-jets, which momentarily broke, like sparks, the darkness of the openings between the hills.

Like the daughter of a sailor-race she was, Donatienne felt its approach with a

quivering of her whole being; after her fashion she was experiencing the eager impatience of her ancestors, rovers over great seas, whose dream-haunted blood had burnt with envy at the sight of new countries.

Like them, too, she was leaving behind her a poor home, a monotonous life—burdens from which her journey would free her.

Tossed to and fro by the crossing of the points, dazzled by the signal-lights outside the station, stupefied by the clamour of the wheels and the whistling of the engines, oblivious of her weariness, even of the little far-off homeland lost amid its furze-bushes, she smiled, younger, fairer, floating on a dream-wave of hope and joy.

An old maid-servant was waiting for her at the station; a brougham was standing outside; they got into the carriage, the bundle containing the nurse's clothes between them.

Donatienne gave short answers to her companion's questions, looking all the time out of the window at the streets—the many long, long streets that seemed to be flying beneath her.

In spite of the lateness of the hour, Paris was alive, bright, noisy; as they crossed the Seine, she thought she was looking at the most beautiful fireworks she had ever seen; as they drove through the Place de la Concorde, she pointed to the Champs Elysées and asked :

“ Is that a forest ? ”

She watched for the enormous houses with their closed doors, and turned to look back at them as they disappeared from sight as if each might have been “ hers.”

And her heart beat fast with the sense that she was at home here, the goal of her journey, as her fathers had felt more than once in their lives of adventure.

When she heard the opening of the massive oaken door of the house wherein she was to serve, and getting out of the brougham, breathed the warm air of the porch filled with the scent of hothouse flowers, she looked so radiant, so apart from past poverty, that the woman with her leant over the *concierge's* window and said :

“ Here's some one who'll soon make herself at home; you mark my words ! ”

They went up the servants' staircase.

.
And well-nigh at the same moment, before the dawn had broken over the land of Plœuc in Brittany, the tall figure of Jean Louarn stood erect upon the hill of Ros Grignon.

He had not slept; it was better to go out to work at once or wander about the woods than to stay in this room too full of her presence; and, for a while, spade on shoulder, he gazed into the darkness beneath him, as if calculating the task to be done; then he sighed and went down the slope.

CHAPTER IV

THE CLEARING OF THE WASTE

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THE CLEARING OF THE WASTE

SIX months had passed and the sky was letting fall its spring rains in frequent, short-lived showers whose tiny drops rebounded from the ground and hung upon the blades of the sprouting wheat.

Louarn was coming back from the Forest where he had been working since November, having hired himself out as a woodcutter for two days in each week. The day's work was finished, the last load of faggots rumbling down the rutted roads, and from time to time, borne on the quiet air, came the sound of distant bells, exquisitely sweet as if the angels were already announcing Easter a little beforehand.

He walked along the long cutting he had despoiled bush by bush and which had marked the line between his own land and the

new border of undergrowth; and he thought of the days that had gone since Donatienne's departure.

It had been a hard winter, and he had had no help in digging the field before sowing his wheat, or a strip under the apple-trees for his buckwheat, or the other, where the soil was poor and stony, for the oats.

Of course, even in past days, Donatienne had not been able to help him very greatly; her arms were not strong enough to wield a spade and the care of the children kept her in the house; but still she had been useful in the seed-sowing; in all the district of Plœuc there could not be found a surer or more nimble hand than hers. When the furrows were made, she would come into the fields there, four or even eight days in succession, if need were.

She would hold up her apron by one corner to her waist, fill it with seed, walk along slowly, with parted fingers, the seed falling in a long line; and where Donatienne had sown, the crops came up more evenly than anywhere else.

But this year the mistress of Ros Grignon

was far away when the grain was sown; there was no talk of her return at the beginning of March when the wheat began to show its green blades and the buckwheat its tiny leaflets of pink.

And the house itself witnessed to her absence. Annette Domerc had no sense of order, all she cared for was to ramble about the roads with the three children, leaving the farmstead as soon as Louarn had gone out, to pick up apples or gossip with the village folk; and the farmer could not get used to the appearance of the sullen girl who said nothing when she was scolded, never spoke of what she was doing, and too often mumbled remarks about the women of the place unsuitable to her youth.

But, as he paid her very little, he kept her on.

It was a melancholy winter, all the sadder for the feelings he had to keep religiously to himself.

It was really this girl who had made him realize that Donatienne wrote but seldom; otherwise he might scarce have noticed it, overdone with work as he was and having no

scale of comparison. But it was true—she did write but little, and her letters were very short.

He always carried the last about with him, sometimes three or four weeks old, and when he was by himself, and unseen by any one at Ros Grignon, he would read it over again, endeavouring to make a mental picture of the things she mentioned.

“Madame took me to the races; there was such a crowd there that I had never seen anything like it. One day I went to a *matinée* at the theatre with Honorine the first parlour-maid.”

Besides it was only once that she had sent money, about the middle of January when Mademoiselle Penhoat's rent-collector, M. Guillon, had threatened to seize everything in payment of the three years' amount owing; and the following week, on receiving only the half of the arrears of rent, as he left he had declared that payment in full at the end of July was the last concession to be granted.

“You'd better have kept your wife at home, or found her a situation hereabouts.

Do you know where she is living ? So young as she is !——”

Louarn had looked at him with those dreamy eyes of the Breton who takes long to comprehend townsfolk ; but the words had left in his heart a doubt and a kind of vague regret—one more to add to so many others !

He had left the Forest and turned a corner of the waste land into the path which led straight up to Ros Grignon. The depth of the shadow thrown upon the ground by the masses of gorse and broom that grew on it unchecked struck him for the first time. Since the cutting of the undergrowth they seemed to have become even more vigorous, and it could be more clearly seen to what a height they had grown, some of them stood a foot above the farmer's head.

Jean Louarn stopped, and dividing the branches with his elbow, looked searchingly into the thicket. The soil still bore the traces of old furrows, bare, cracked, excavated by insects and field mice, and here and there—knotted, running over with sap, branched like trees—rose the green stems of the broom and the grey stems of the gorse, whose top-

most branches above in the free air were already swelling with pale-hued thorns and reddening buds.

“Our forefathers cultivated this waste,” thought Louarn; “suppose I did likewise? It might bring in something.”

He took a dozen steps backwards, looking at his crops, and trying to imagine the fine effect it would make as a whole when the waste land had disappeared, and thinking, because she was never out of his thoughts:

“Wouldn’t Donatienne be surprised!”

He had scarcely got into the room at Ros Grignon when Annette Domerc, who was sitting in a low chair near the fire, pointed to the table.

“There’s a letter come at last, M. Louarn; the mistress has written to you.”

He threw down the iron fork he was carrying, eagerly seized the letter and went back to the threshold, where the light was still strong, to read it.

Another moment and he would have thought that Donatienne’s letter was very short; but she wrote: “I am happy, except that I miss the children. Kiss them all for

me;" and he was so greatly in need of happiness, he felt so strongly drawn to her by the idea of the new scheme the thought of her had inspired, that he forgot everything but that she *had* written, she had not forgotten Ros Grignon, she had begged the father to kiss the little ones.

Satisfied, he put Donatienne's letter into his jacket-pocket, came back into the house, and kissed Noémi and Lucienne, who were playing near the chest.

"You darlings!" he said, lifting them up one after the other; "Maman says I am to kiss you for her. You remember Maman Donatienne, don't you?"

As he bent over Joël, lying asleep on the servant's knee, he heard Annette Domerc's shrill little giggle and felt the touch of her tousled hair which she seldom kept neatly under cap.

"It's good news Maîtresse Louarn sends, then?" she asked; "I suppose she's coming back?"

Louarn stood upright and from his great height looked down on the girl who looked up at him with a queer sort of smile on her face

and eyes where gleams came and went as in the eyes of a cat.

“How can you imagine she can come back?” said the farmer; “she is still nursing.”

“Oh, I thought—you looked so cheerful!”

Annette's countenance had resumed its usual expression of vague boredom, and Louarn longing to-night, for once in his life, to confide in some one and share his taste of hope and happiness, left the girl, and seating himself at the other side of the hearth on the sloping wooden edge of the bed, he called Noémi, his eldest child, who might perhaps understand a little, and put her in front of him.

“My little girl,” he said gently, “I've got an idea; you know the piece of waste land?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Well, I'm going to cut it all down; I'm not going to leave a blade of poor grass standing. I'm going to do it all by myself. Then I'll dig the earth and trench it, and it will all be done by the time Maman Donatienne comes back. Won't she be glad when

she sees a field of potatoes or colza there ! I think I shall put in colza. Don't you think she'll be pleased ? ”

“ But the nests ? ” asked the child.

“ I'll give them to you.”

He noticed how Noémi's eyes lighted up with pleasure, and in his secret heart felt as if it were the absent one who smiled on him in encouragement.

He kept the child up, making merry with her, though he was taciturn by nature, and not given to caresses, trying to make her laugh that he might again see the brightening of her eyes.

Next day he began upon the waste, in the very middle of the dark, gold-crested line it made in front of Ros Grignon.

Standing upright at the bottom of the grass-grown trench around the gorse-bushes, he leant his knee against the side, and taking his newly-ground bill-hook, lifted it at arm's length and brought it down on the tough, twisted stems of the bush, whose enormous branches spread abroad like tossed hay. The whole waste seemed to tremble ; a gust of wind blew its head about ; two blackbirds

flew out with shrill cries, and Louarn could hear the rustling of a thousand invisible insects as they ran for their holes.

He smiled as he raised his bill-hook again, and again he struck at the same spot, widening the gaping rent, white chips flying around, then felt the heavy mass of branches quiver, and stepped backwards while, with a convulsive shudder, it fell to the ground, all its blossoms uppermost.

The children, who with Annette Domerc were watching him from the top of the hill, clapped their hands. Louarn chopped off the fibres left on the bark, threw the gorse-bush aside, and went farther in upon the waste.

By noon there could be seen amongst the dense brushwood a clear circle half as large as the room at the Farm.

Under the heat of the sun, already great, that day and the days that followed, he went on with his work with passionate eagerness. In spite of his sheep-skin gloves, his hands were covered with blood; in spite of his long inurement to toil, he was worn out when he came in at dusk, picking out, one by one, the thorns that had pierced his fingers.

Yet he would say, with a kind of joyful pride :

“It’s been a hard day; but after fifty more like it, or even forty-five, the job will be getting on.”

Annette Domerc looked at him without speaking; Noémi was not listening; the fire was going out under the tripod where the kettle had stood, and he said again, answered by nothing but his own thoughts that had flown far from Ros Grignon :

“Fifty more—perhaps only forty-five.”

The fine days of summer had begun and the country around Ros Grignon was green; the apple-trees looked like the primrose-balls children make in the spring. In daytime the bees pillaged them, and at night there was a scent of honey in the poor room and the rosy petals were blown in at the door and drifted under the beds.

Louarn, writing to his wife, told her about it; she had not answered his last letters and her silence made him anxious.

He was afraid Annette Domerc might guess what he was thinking, for she seemed to be watching him.

So then he wrote that it would be a good year for cider, hoping that Donatienne would rejoice at the news and write to thank him. But nothing came.

He had made great way with the clearing of the waste and there was nothing left but a strip of gorse along the Forest, when the oats beyond the apple-trees began to ripen. So light a crop, so easily lost ! Louarn forsook his bill-hook and took up his sickle.

The ears in their turn fell as the waste-land bushes had done, and presently stood up again in sheaves ; the buckwheat unfolded its thousands of white blossoms. The overpowering heat of July strained the man's sweating loins, bowed to his harvesting, and the evenings were long ; still not too long, for Louarn was still waiting for the letter which did not come.

Day after day he hoped for it, lying in wait outside his house until night had quite fallen over the fields and the Forest.

When any one questioned him he made shift to answer :

“ Oh yes ! I've had news of her—she's quite well.”

And this was quite true, for a cousin of his, a man who sold eggs and poultry, having passed Ros Grignon on his way back from Yffiniac, had brought him this news which he had heard from Donatienne's relations—"the Moulin-Haye folk" as he called them.

But no word had come to comfort the clearer of the waste, the harvester of the sheaves, the husband dream-haunted and feverish with fatigue, whose tears fell silently through the short summer nights.

CHAPTER V
THE DISTRRAINT

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A FEW days before the end of July, the bailiff who had come a week earlier to demand from Louarn the payment of his arrears of rent, returned to seize the furniture in the name of Mademoiselle Penhoat.

As soon as he caught sight of him, two witnesses with him, coming up the road to Ros Grignon, Louarn ceased reaping the wheat, now quite ripe, and of which he had cut but one row. He stuck the point of his sickle into the ground, and walked to the very end of the waste land, where he stood, his back against an enormous broom-bush, one of the last left standing at the skirt of the Forest.

There, with crossed arms, whence he could see the whole of the farmstead—the few acres which had meant so much toil, so much

poverty, all he had had of earthly affection and all of hope he still kept—he waited.

The bailiff left the men who were with him at the foot of the hillock, and walked towards the farmer. He looked as poor as the peasant upon whom he had to serve the writ. He wore a thread-bare jacket and a battered felt hat, and as he stumbled over the furrows he kept raising his gaunt head, framed in two white whiskers, to see if Louarn would let him come right across the field without troubling himself to take a step forwards.

But Louarn never moved; it was not until they were separated by only a couple of furrows that he drew himself up, with a jerk of his shoulders that shook the broom-bush and said, his teeth clenched with emotion :

“ So you’ve come back to seize my goods ? ”

“ Yes—Mademoiselle Penhoat has sent me——”

“ I’m not blaming you,” interrupted Louarn; “ you’re only doing what’s right, since it’s your trade. But you’re a man, and I want to tell you something, so that you may judge for yourself. Look before you, right and left, to the end of the slope.”

The astonished bailiff stared first at the tall peasant, so unlike the ordinary style of debtor, and then at the naked soil and its projecting sharp-pointed roots showing the traces of the axe.

“I’ve been working for three months at this brushwood which has torn my hands to pieces. Now look behind you at the underwood I hewed down last winter. Look at my ripe wheat, and my buckwheat. You can’t say I’ve been lazy, can you? You can’t say that.”

“No.”

“Well, I’ve done all that for my children, and for my wife who is still with rich people in Paris. You see, don’t you, that she can’t let me be sold up like a beggar?”

“She ought to pay up, of course,” said the bailiff.

“How much time longer will you give me?”

“To-day’s Tuesday, Maître Louarn; I’ll advertise the sale for Sunday week.”

“You will be paid,” said Louarn; “I’ll send her a telegram—and she’ll answer it.”

As he spoke his whole body shook and his

voice was low and broken by tears as he said, "She will answer;" but he did not weep, but only lifted his head a little and looked towards Ros Grignon.

The bailiff could not see Louarn's eyes now, and was making ready to read out clauses of his legal document, when he felt the farmer's hand laid heavily on his shoulder.

"Don't read out your paper," said Louarn; "I won't listen to it, I won't sign anything. I know I owe more than I possess to Mademoiselle Penhoat and other people in Plœuc who've given me credit. Go into my house by yourself."

"But I shall want you, Maître Louarn."

"No, you won't want me. You can put down everything you find on your list—the bed, the table, the cow——"

"But you have the right to keep——"

"I tell you put down everything!" said the farmer angrily, as he pointed to the house; put down the chairs, the gilt ornaments and the wedding-garments, and the silk apron that's in the chest."

"But Maître Louarn, I never knew anybody who——"

“Put down the two caps she bought a month before she went away with the money she got for her spinning, and her spinning-wheel that’s hanging from the beams. All those came to me with Donatienne, and if she didn’t answer, you must see, you bailiff—now you know all that I have done for her sake, that I couldn’t keep anything she brought me. No, indeed, I couldn’t keep the very smallest thing that’s there! Put it all down.”

The bailiff shrugged his shoulders, guessing at a more than common trouble which moved him vaguely, and not knowing what to say, folded his papers and turned to go.

“There’s only one thing I’ll keep,” said Louarn; “the portrait that hangs on the wall. No one but I has any right to it.”

The man nodded assent without turning, and went on his way towards Ros Grignon; little Noémi, standing at the open door, ran in crying with fright.

Louarn strode along the road to Plœuc. As he was seen passing the first houses, staring straight in front of him like a man in a dream, who pays no heed to the direction

in which he goes, the housewives came out upon their doorsteps.

They were aware that the bailiff had started for Ros Grignon; some of them did not speak but assumed an air of pity after Louarn had passed; others, especially the younger women, joked in whispers to each other. A chorus of allusions and scandal arose behind his back, like a cloud of dust.

News about Donatienne—news of which he was ignorant—had got about in the village and awakened the curiosity of its people as to the man's arrival.

He heard nothing, until at the crossroads where he turned towards the post-office, the baker's wife, who was newly married and thoughtless in talk, said aloud to a group of people :

“Poor fellow ! he must have heard that the child is dead, and Donatienne——”

At the sound of his wife's name, Louarn awoke as from a dream, and the look he gave the little shopkeeper was so bewildered with wonder that she blushed to the wings of her cap and went back into her shop.

But men, who had been standing about in groups, all of whom he knew, turned their heads away and separated for fear that he might speak to them.

“The child is dead !” The words clutched at Louarn’s heart. “The child is dead !” When did it die ? It must surely mean the child of the rich people in Paris who had engaged Donatienne. Why hadn’t she written to tell him ? If it was dead, why hadn’t she come back ? Could he have heard aright, or could it be that the child was only just dead and Donatienne was coming back ? But then, why had the baker’s wife said “Poor fellow !” ? Yet that was the most likely thing—yes, the child had just died, and Donatienne, in her distress at her nursling’s illness, had not written about it. Or, perhaps, she had written to some one else, afraid that her husband might blame her. Blame her ! no indeed ; he would never do that, he was quite sure she would have done her best for the dead baby ! Or she wanted to tell him herself how the misfortune had happened, through no fault of hers. She had written to give notice of her return—

her letter, perhaps even Donatienne herself, were already on their way.

“The child is dead—the child is dead!” So these fancies chased each other through Louarn’s mind, one by one to be rejected, some because they accused Donatienne, others because the embarrassed looks of the people he met made him feel that misfortune was upon him. “The child is dead.”

When he knocked at the post-office shutter, he looked so white that the clerk, a young girl, said :

“There’s nothing wrong with you at home, is there, Maître Louarn ?”

“Nothing but the distraint.”

“Oh, the distraint ! One gets over that. My own father was distrained and his business was all the better afterwards. Don’t be too worried over that.”

Not for the world would Louarn have owned to the hideous doubt that gripped him ; but through the little window he saw how kind and peaceful was the clerk’s face and felt a little comforted that there was not the slightest trace of irony to be read on it. She wrote the telegram for him :

“Everything at Ros Grignon has been seized. Everything is to be sold. I implore you to send money and news. Jean.”

She read it over to him, he paid, and as he still gazed at her, “That’s all,” she said gently.

The shutter fell to and Jean Louarn escaped by a street inhabited solely by poor folk and which led out straight to the country.

He entered Ros Grignon just as the bailiff and his witnesses were leaving the house. As they left the threshold, they touched their hats to the farmer as he swung up the little pathway to the left. Louarn lifted his hand to the velvet brim of his hat, and waiting till the two other men had passed, he said to the bailiff:

“You spoke of Sunday week for the sale, but that’s too far off. Will you arrange it for next Sunday?”

“Well, that might be managed, since you consent, and there are so few things——”

“Then on Sunday,” said Louarn; “she’ll have had much more than time enough to answer by then, and I shall know what my life is to be.”

These incomprehensible words made the two smock-frocked witnesses turn round, and for a moment they looked questioningly at Louarn's bitter face with something of trouble on their inexpressive countenances; but it passed, and presently, from the foot of the hillock and then from the stony road, rose the sound of their voices in loud, coarse laughter.

At Ros Grignon the house was empty; Louarn was almost glad to find neither his children nor Annette Domerc at home; he ascertained that nothing had been moved from its place, and then, more weary than if he had been labouring over the harvest, he threw himself upon a heap of hay in the stable.

The cow was asleep before the empty manger, the flies buzzed as they danced round her in the ray of light that pierced the low window. Under the beams encumbered with branches, poles, and disused hen-coops, the air was heavy and drowsy—with heat which made bits of half-baked bark crackle.

Louarn slept for some hours; he was awakened by a touch on his hand of a smaller

one than his. He sat up in surprise, not certain to whom it belonged—Annette Domerc, who was sitting close to him, or Noémi whom she was holding on her knee. The girl appeared to be playing with the child.

“What are you doing here?” asked the farmer.

She laughed, the false-ringing laugh which always made Louarn uneasy.

“Me? I came to tell you that the buckwheat broth has been ready more than half-an-hour, and as you were so fast asleep I waited. It’s past seven o’clock.”

“You could have called out to me from the room,” said Louarn, getting up.

Her eyes followed him as she stood still, and she murmured with scarce a movement of her pale lips:

“And besides, I was sorry for you, Maître Louarn.”

He made no answer, was even more silent than usual at supper, and afterwards spent a long time out of doors wandering about in the darkness. When he went to bed, everything was quiet at Ros Grignon. The

soft breathing of the children from their beds fell upon his listening ears for hours as he lay behind the curtains already marked for sale.

It seemed odd that he caught no similar sound of breathing from the servant's bed, and it seemed to him more than once that from the dark corner where Annette Domerc lay, two open eyes—two eyes like yellow sparks—were gazing at him.

During the next three days, he was scarcely seen at Ros Grignon, and a bit of bread, cut and eaten standing, was all he ate. His whole time was spent in walking about the roads, especially the road to Plœuc, or behind the hedges in the fields watching for the postman or the dropsical woman who carried telegrams to the villages and farms. But the postman alone went by, unconscious of the horrible anguish with which his movements were being watched.

Would he turn his eyes towards the roof of Ros Grignon like one who measures the well-known distance to his destination? Before he got to the turn in the road, would he raise the flap of his leather bag? Would

he turn in between the two sickly service-trees that stood at the entrance of the farmstead ?

Alas ! he only went by with bent head at his usual even, weary pace ; he brushed past the service-trees just as he might have brushed past any other trees, on his way to the lucky people who perhaps were not looking for his coming, and would not bless him for it.

Then Louarn tried to hope that some stranger, some chance messenger, who had had news and knew of the farmer's evil plight, would take the road to the house. But the carts rolled by and the foot-passengers went on their way.

As the days went by, Annette Domerc's behaviour became bolder ; on the rare occasions when Louarn met her, she spoke to him first, and but for that constant little spark of fire in her eyes it might have been supposed that she shared the farmer's mortal anxiety.

She pitied him aloud ; she sighed when he came in at night, so terribly upset that she dared not question him further. He found her ready to walk long distances for him to

farms which still owed him small sums for journey-work. She had even gone so far as to speak to him—for he had fallen so low as to listen to her now that he was losing all hope—words that the master of Ros Grignon would not have tolerated in earlier days.

“ Ah ! ” she had said to him, “ if I had been in her place, you wouldn’t have gone without either money or news ! ”

And he had allowed the servant-girl to arraign his wife !

By the Saturday evening he felt certain that Donatienne would not save Ros Grignon.

The day was ending in the enchanting beauty of the Breton summer when a sudden breeze from the sea brings freshness on its wings. The sky was a pale gold ; the boughs of the forest-trees swayed gently, bathed in the waves of warm air which stirred the tired leaves ; clouds like festival-wreaths sailed along quickly, casting no shadows ; out of the depths had arisen a mighty breath of life to refresh the earth.

Louarn came in with clenched hands, and as if he had come to some definite decision,

for his eyes were angry as Annette Domerc had not often seen them.

It had taken months of anxiety and three days of agony to bring him to the last extremity of questioning the servant and permitting another woman to become the judge of Donatienne's honour.

But all was lost now and he *must* know.

"Come here!" he said.

Annette Domerc had made ready for the master's return. She had put on her cleanest gown and her cap of checked muslin, from under which straggled wisps of her yellow hair.

She came towards Louarn, who had seated himself on the bench to the left of the hearth, the very spot where, on that last evening, he had held Donatienne so long in his arms.

She stood before him, her hanging hands folded before her over her apron. Their eyes met, the man's fierce with anger, the girl's filled with a languishing compassion.

"Nothing has come," he said, "she hasn't answered. Do you understand why? Do you know why?"

“My poor master,” she said evasively; “and everything is to be sold to-morrow!”

“Sold! what do I care about that now? But she—where is she? What is she doing? Perhaps you’ve heard—you’re a talker?”

“People are saying she won’t come back, Maître Louarn; they’re saying too that you could find some one to lend you what you want. Everybody isn’t so hard-hearted as your wife. I’ve got a rich uncle; I’ll go at once, this evening, to ask him for the money, and come back, and you’ll be able to stay on at Ros Grignon.”

She unclasped her hands, laid one on the big man’s shoulder, and her eyes supplied the real meaning of the words as she said with smiling lips:

“And I’ll stay on with you, too——”

He started upright; this time he understood.

“You good-for-nothing hussy!” he cried; “I asked you for news, I’d give my life to hear some, and that’s all you can find to tell me! You know nothing—I felt sure you didn’t! Be off with you!”

She threw herself away from him.

“Oh, indeed!” she screamed as she moved

backwards round the table. "It's just herself that's a good-for-nothing hussy! Everybody knows it! The child's dead; she's not a nurse any longer; she's taken another place!"

The girl was white and wild with rage.

"You want news of her, do you? I can give you some. She's living up on the sixth storey with the footmen and the coachmen! She's just amusing herself—she's just earning money for herself—that's all!"

"Be off, Annette Domerc! be off, I say!" and the farmer rushed at her to put her out.

But with a couple of bounds she gained the door, and Louarn heard her shrill laugh.

"She'll never come back!" she screamed.
"Never—never!"

For a moment she looked defiantly at the farmer as he stooped to pick up stones to throw at her as if she had been a dog; then she jumped over a broom-bush, ran along the path, and disappeared at the turn of the road.

The three frightened children were huddled together crying in a corner of the room.

"Be quiet, you there!" said Louarn.

He came in quickly, took from the wall Donatienne's photograph in its little frame of paper made to represent tortoiseshell, pulled the door to, and ran off.

In the yard at la Hautiere, the small farmstead nearest to Ros Grignon, he caught sight of a woman, the farmer's sister, driving a flock of chickens before her.

"Jeanne-Marie," he called out to her over the wall, "for the love of God go and look after my children who are all alone! I'm to be sold up to-morrow, and there's somewhere I must go to-night."

Her eyes filled with tears at the mere sight of him; she asked no questions, but said simply, "Yes," and he started off again at once.

A little further on he plunged into the Forest; he knew the clearings, guiding himself by the ancient oak-trees whose shapes were familiar to him, and to shorten the way went straight through the wood.

Dusk was beginning to dim the last gold of the sky; the wind came in great gusts, foretelling the approach of rain, and then rushed by with a sound like that of the

ocean—the only thing save Louarn moving across the solitary Forest.

The farmer had bent the brim of his hat down over his forehead and plunged straight onwards. The first, the only plan he could think of in his hour of forsaken desolation was to hurry to Donatienne's parents at Moulin-Haye. He had seen them but once since his marriage, and between him and them no mutual affection had ever arisen. The father despised landmen, the mother had objected to the marriage of a pretty girl like Donatienne with so poor a man as Louarn.

But in his present overwhelming misery, the merest chance seemed as if it might mean salvation. From them he expected neither money nor news, but in the heart of the forsaken husband a voice arose and cried out to him :

“ Go to them ! They'll tell you that that girl lied ; they'll find some explanation—parents always can—they've seen the children grow up ! Go to *them* ! ”

And he went.

The Forest darkened to blackness ; enormous clouds hid the stars that had only just

peeped out over the clearings; from time to time flocks of rooks, startled from sleep, flew off in phantom-like wheelings. The first drops of rain seemed to bring a lull in the wind, but the night grew darker and darker.

At the crossway of Gourlay, where six roads meet, Louarn mistook his path, and stumbled about upon the rutted slopes where lay the trunks of lately felled trees; and as he stumbled his elbow would touch the little paper frame hidden in his jacket-pocket; the picture of Donatienne as she looked in that—young and shy, her gentle, bright eyes under her Breton cap—passed before his mental vision, and each time he saw her thus in thought, he said to himself with still stronger conviction :

“It can’t be true! *They* won’t believe either the evil things that have been said about you, Donatienne!”

And his weariness, the mud that weighed down the soles of his boots, the rain that whipped his face, all were forgotten for a while, until once more he was conscious that his feet were dragging and slipping upon

the drenched ground while the water fell in drops from his jacket.

A still heavier shower forced him to take shelter inside a hollow tree-trunk on the outskirts of the Forest. Shivering with cold, he wandered about the waste lands and the small fields divided by hedges of furze between Plaintel and Plédran.

At break of day, having completely lost his way, he found himself in a hollow road near the farm of la Ville-Hervy, but beginning to make out shapes against the sky, he looked round for a church-steeple, recognized that of Plédran, and, amidst meadows grey as spider's-webs, soon caught sight of the pale shimmer of the little river Urne.

The cocks were crowing when he knocked at the door of a house standing upon a strip of dry mud a little below the spot where the Urne runs swiftly between two rocks to spread itself out over a bed hollowed by the tides.

After forty years at sea Donatienne's father had taken to fishing these pools, swarming with mullet and bass.

From inside the house, Louarn heard a voice asking: "What do you want at this

time of day ? ” and then some one opened the door while hidden behind it.

“ It’s I,” said the farmer.

There was no answer.

Near the bedstead at the end of the low-pitched, smoke-blackened room, Donatienne’s mother was finishing dressing herself, while her husband, taciturn by nature like so many Bretons, had re-seated himself in front of the fire to finish baiting his eel-lines.

Louarn drew near the heap of damp heather which smouldered without flame. As he entered, a dread that he might be about to hear the contrary of that his whole being longed for, had seized him. He took a chair in the chimney-corner beside the old sailor whose head, as shaggy as a goat’s, went regularly up and down over an earthen pot, as he first took from it a worm, which he then fastened on to one of the hooks of the line coiled over his knees.

“ I’ve been walking all night,” said Louarn ;
“ give me a bit of bread.”

The woman pushed the ends of her shawl into the band of her apron, and brought out a slice of bread, gazing defiantly at the

farmer of Ros Grignon as he crouched over the fire. She was small and thin, with regular features and a very withered skin.

“ You’ve come for money, I suppose ? ” she asked.

He took the bread, and said very gently, but without looking at her :

“ No, I am worried about Donatienne—she hasn’t written to me.”

Did he hope that one or other of her parents would say : “ But she’s written to us ! ”

He paused a little.

“ When she was at home with you,” he went on, “ did she like running about to the fairs ? ”

“ Yes, she did,” said the old woman ; “ and since she got married, she hasn’t been able to, poor girl.”

“ Did you find that she paid heed to what you said ? ”

“ I never said anything to put her out, and her father was never at home.”

“ Do you believe her capable of doing all they say about her ? For you know what they’re saying about Donatienne.”

In the dim light beginning to steal into

the room, Louarn could see the old woman's eyes, those dark eyes, so like Donatienne's when she said "No." Raising her voice, she answered :

" You know her better than we do, Jean Louarn. Have you come to taunt us about our daughter ? "

" No," said Louarn; " I don't want to offend you."

" Well then, why are you talking about the times before your marriage ? "

" Because, when one is unhappy, Mère Le Clech, all sorts of fancies come into one's head. But there's only one thing I want to know. Why has she forsaken me ? "

" If she'd been happy with you, Jean Louarn, she wouldn't have done it."

" But I was so happy with her ! It can't be true ! "

" If you'd given her better food ! "

" Mère Le Clech, I've worked so hard for her sake that my hands are just one sore."

" If you'd dressed her as she used to be dressed when she was a girl."

" I dressed her as well as I could, and I loved her with all my soul."

“ If you hadn’t given her three children, born to poverty, that you can’t keep ! Do you suppose she has any desire to come back ? She knows too well what to expect.”

“ No—she does *not* know ! ” cried Louarn, rising and laying the scarce-tasted slice of bread on the table. “ The bread you give here is paid too dear ; I’ll eat no more of it. I’ll quit the country.”

Old Le Clech, who had gone on baiting his lines and apparently paying no attention to the other’s talk, shook his head, as if to say : “ What’s the use of leaving Brittany just because of some trouble about a woman ? ”

His wife, too, had turned very white ; the grief so violent in its expression roused a kind of respect in each, and they waited for Louarn’s next words as for an oracle.

Jean Louarn cast a glance at the corner of the room where he remembered of old seeing Donatienne’s bed when he came courting her on Sundays. Then he said :

“ Before this time to-morrow I shall have left Ros Grignon. I shall take Noémi, Lucienne and Joël with me, and you will never see them again.”

The coil of lines fell and their leaden weights rang dull as they touched the floor. A silence fell upon the three and each seemed to be pondering the inevitable character of this disaster.

Le Clech, who had not yet spoken, said without moving from his seat :

“ Since you’re not coming back, Louarn, you might at least eat of my bread ; it was given willingly.”

“ And I’ve got some new cider, too,” said the woman in a quieter voice.

But Jean Louarn said never a word, and pulling his hat over his eyes, went out from the door. He was leaving behind him the memory of a love—a young and mutual love—and he did not turn his head.

The old man, who had stepped out upon the threshold, seemed for a while to be in deep thought ; then the glamour of life re-awoke in his red-brown eyes—his ear had caught the sound of the waves rippling over the banks of the Urne, and his nostrils the smell of the seaweed borne on the wind from the rising tide on the shores at Roselier, Yffiniac and the Guettes.

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST SUNDAY IN THE NATIVE COUNTRY

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THE bells were ringing in the calm air, under a sky cleared and paled by the recent rains, and the people of Plœuc, standing in groups round the doors of the church, were talking noisily after coming out from High Mass.

A few servant-girls whose mistresses were waiting for them, and mothers hurrying home to relieve husbands from the care of children, were already scattered about the streets and roads. There was a sound of sabots, of opening doors, of drawling voices, of sly laughter, coming and going with the pealing of the bells.

It frightened Louarn. He slipped round the houses to the east, ashamed of his mud-bespattered clothes, his boots looking the

colour of the soil, and the lamentable sight he felt he must be.

If he hurried he would be able to reach the beginning of the road from Plœuc to Moncontour without meeting a soul.

Once there, he mounted four steps dividing a garden-wall, went past a bit of hedge, and, without knocking, walked into the dining-room, where sat the Abbé Hourtier, once a rector on the coast, now retired and living in the parish of Plœuc, and who was built after the fashion of those rocks which are supposed to resemble human beings.

The Abbé had sung High Mass, and was resting, seated on a rush-bottomed chair, his elbows on the table and his midday meal before him.

The strong light from the window would have dazzled other eyes than his—the sea-coloured eyes of the fisherman, under tired, weary lids.

When Louarn sat down beside him, it could be seen that the two men were of the same race, alike in figure and well-nigh in soul.

They had long loved one another and were accustomed to exchange a silent greeting when they met upon the road.

The Abbé therefore felt no surprise that Louarn had come to confide his sorrow to him; he had listened to so many, comforted so many similar troubles—mournings of husbands or wives; forsakings; early deaths of children; vessels lost with all on board; wrecked fortunes, wrecked friendships, wrecked loves—that his clear eyes never lost a certain look of compassion even in the presence of the happy.

This pitiful look fell like balm on Jean Louarn's heart.

“Jean,” said the Abbé, “you needn't tell me anything—it would only make the trouble worse; don't try to tell me—I know all about it.”

“But *I* don't know all about it,” said the farmer, “and I'm so miserable; I'm suffering, I tell you, suffering like Him on the Cross there!”

And he looked towards the little plaster crucifix hanging near the window, sole ornament of the bare, whitewashed room.

M. Hourtier gazed at the image with an increase of his pitiful expression, and said :

“ It is not enough to resemble Him in His sufferings, my poor Louarn ; do you resemble Him in forgiveness ? ”

“ I don’t dare to say so. What has she done to deserve my forgiveness ? ”

“ What do we ourselves do, my friend ? Nothing but to be weak and prone to evil. Ah ! those poor girls of ours who, before they’re twenty, go away to suckle other people’s children ! I don’t say this to hurt you, Jean Louarn ; but I’ve always thought there was no trouble to be compared to that. When I see houses like yours, where the husband and children are left by themselves, truly I tell you my greatest sympathy is for the wife who has gone.”

“ And what about us ? ” said Louarn.

“ Well, you can stay on Breton soil, in houses to shelter you, and you have some one to love still with you. You had Noémi, and Lucienne, and Joël ; you had fields to bring you food. But she was cut off in a moment from everything and flung out there. If you sowed a handful of buckwheat on your

waste land, would you resent its perishing, Jean Louarn ? I feel certain your Donatienne struggled against it; I feel certain that she was carried away because she missed your support and all the evils of life were new to her. If she came back——”

The farmer made a great effort to answer, and two tears—the first—filled his eyes.

“ No,” he said, “ she won’t come back for my sake. I have implored her to come. She would rather I were sold up.”

“ Louarn,” said the Abbé gently, “ she is a mother, too. Perhaps some day—I’ll write to her—I’ll try—I promise you I will.”

“ In my misery,” said Louarn, “ I’ve sometimes thought she might come back because of them. She always loved them better than she did me. But we shall be far away.”

“ Where are you going ? ”

The man stretched out his arm towards the window.

“ To Vendée, M. Hourtier; I hear there’s work to be got there for poor folk at the potato-digging season. I shall go to Vendée.”

His vague gesture swept the horizon; to

Jean Louarn, as to so many of his fellow Bretons, la Vendée, the land that opens out to the east of Brittany, represents all the rest of France.

“But I shall not know where to write to you if she comes back.”

A sorrowful smile, an expression almost childlike, crossed the farmer's sad face.

“I've thought of that,” he said; “I've got her portrait; I wouldn't let them have that; but I won't take it away with me—it might get broken on the road. I thought, perhaps, you would keep it. Any letters that come from her, you could put behind it until I write. If she did come back, she'd find *something* at least left from her old home.”

He went up to the chimney-piece, took from his pocket the little imitation tortoise-shell frame containing the portrait of his wife taken the day after her wedding, and stood it upright on the shelf.

He tried to slip his rough, scar-seamed hand into the narrow space between the frame and the wall.

“You'll put them there, behind the picture.”

The Abbé Hourtier had risen; he was as tall as Louarn and with broader shoulders.

The two giants—strong to suffer, but moved to tenderness each for each—held one another in so close an embrace that they seemed to wrestle.

“ I promise you everything,” said the Abbé solemnly.

Many things left unspoken had been understood and ratified between their two souls; no further word was exchanged, and they parted in the garden with countenances so impassive that they might have been chance passers-by in life, with no link of memory between them.

CHAPTER VII
THE DEPARTURE OF THE MAN

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THE next day, in the wan light of dawn, at the hour when shutters begin to open to the chirping of the sparrows, a man was crossing Plœuc in the direction of Moncontour.

It was Louarn, whose goods had been sold the previous day.

He had left Ros Grignon too early to be able even to look for the last time upon his apple-trees, his fields or the Forest.

Noémi walked at his right hand, a tiny bundle tied to her elbow, and he was dragging a little wooden hand-cart in which, face to face, lay Lucienne and Joël, both fast asleep.

Between them stood a black basket which had belonged to Donatienne; and behind, the handle of a shovel rose above the back of the cart, bumping over every uneven bit of the road.

Many of the inhabitants of the town were

still asleep, and those who stood leaning over the low half-doors of their houses, no longer laughed, but were silent, for grief walked beside the poor farmer and gave him dignity.

Louarn made no effort to hide himself now; he had set forth on an unknown road, without goal or probability of return. He had become the vagrant in whom no one is interested and for whom no man will answer.

But now he had won the pity of his former friends.

When he had passed the corner of the square where stood the baker's shop, a woman came out of it—a very young woman—who silently approached the cart and laid a big loaf between the two children.

Louarn may have felt his load a trifle the heavier to pull, but he did not turn round.

A little further on, upon the road leading out of Plœuc, some one else was watching for the passing of Louarn.

This watcher kept along the garden-wall, with downcast eyes.

So long as the man's regular footfalls and the creaking of the wooden wheels could be heard, the big shadow that fell upon the

walls of the walk never moved. But, as the group of travellers grew less and less in the distance and, almost concealed by the hedges, was well-nigh out of sight, the Abbé Hourtier, thinking of the strangers who had been Donatienne's ruin, and that far-off world of big and little folk which had caused Louarn's disaster, raised his clenched fist, as if to hurl a curse at the sun beginning to redden the lower branches of his lilacs; then, remembering the words he had said yesterday, the gesture ended in one of benediction on those who were going.

The man had disappeared behind the trees; the bright morning's joyous song floated over Plœuc, and Brittany owned but one poor wretch the less.

CHAPTER VIII

THE JOURNEY

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JEAN LOUARN had been walking for hours, dragging behind him the little wooden cart with its load—the two sleeping children, Donatienne's black basket, the shovel, and the big loaf, the gift of pity. Nothing else of all he had possessed was left to him, except the grief he carried with him, too.

He wended his way towards the east, with bowed back, speaking no word, his eyes taking no note of those he met, nor interest in the objects he passed, his gaunt head cutting its way through light and wind like the prow of a vessel, and as changeless in expression.

On and on he went.

Some labourers at work in the fields beside the road, mates of his in early ploughing or the harvesting of the ripe oats, seeing him go by at the break of day, had asked each other :

“ Who's that ? ”

“It’s Jean Louarn, the poor fellow, you know, who was distrained and then sold up, because of Donatienne.”

“Oh, yes; she was a wet-nurse in Paris, and she wouldn’t come back or send him any money—I remember. Where’s he going off to like that?”

“To la Vendée, I believe.”

“There’s not always luck to be found in la Vendée!”

“No—not always; but go on working, my boy, he might hear you.”

His whole story was told in their words.

Later, in the middle of a small town, the women, standing at their doors, had said:

“I’m sure that man comes from Plœuc, by his clothes; but I can’t think of his name. Where can he be taking his children?”

“To relations, perhaps; there’s no meeting or fair to-day.”

And now, there was no one left to recognize him; he had passed the narrow boundary within whose circle the name of his own village was familiar. Already he had become a stranger, and as he went by people merely remarked:

“ He looks very poor.”

As for him, he took no notice of the people he passed or the country around him; it no longer held the fields he had known from his youth, the waste lands, the woods, the meadows of the parish of Plœuc—those low-lying meadows formed by two slopes of grass divided by a brook so slightly that they looked like the leaves of a dropped book. Now his road lay amongst other but similar meadows and woods and patches of buckwheat, upon which the shadows of the apple-trees fell in rounded masses.

He had longed to find himself in the midst of new things, unseen and unspoken of by all; and now that he was actually surrounded by them, he did not even look at them; he had left his heart behind him; they had no power yet to still his pain.

On and on he went; his short jacket, his big hat edged with velvet swayed rhythmically; his hand dragged the little cart; once only during the whole morning had he stopped to replenish the milk Joël had drunk. It was very hot; the summer insects sang of noon.

Then a voice pleaded :

“I’m hungry, Papa, I’m hungry !”

Could he have forgotten the companions of his exile ?

He stopped short, as if taken by surprise, and gazed—vaguely at first—at his eldest child, walking behind him close to the left wheel of the little cart, the wheel that grated at every turn.

She had walked until she could walk no longer; and now, one leg bent double and aching with weariness, she was standing on one foot like a sleeping bird.

Her eyes were full of dismay at the strange road and the things she had been wondering over, and still wet with the tears Louarn had not noticed.

A round cap of black stuff studded with half-a-dozen gold spangles, such as many Breton children wear, fitted tightly on the child’s head, showing only a narrow fringe of light chestnut-coloured hair which would darken towards her twelfth year.

At this moment Noémi wore the sorrowful look that robs a child’s face of its childlike character, and seems to give it a life’s ex-

perience. "That's what she will look like some day," one thinks to oneself.

"I'm hungry," she said again. "Is it very far off still—where we're going?"

Her father, who had stooped to his heels to stroke Noémi's cheek, nodded his head as he answered:

"Oh, yes, my child—very far off still!"

In truth he did not quite know where he was going; but he felt it must be far away, for he was flying from the memory of his happiness and his sorrow. He was seeking that peace which would have none of him, and when he noticed that Noémi's face was quivering with trouble that seemed to say: "Then I shall never be able to go so far with you," he regretted having spoken as he had done.

"We shall not go all the way at once," he went on; "we'll rest, look, we'll rest here; it's time to eat our loaf."

A few paces to the right there was an opening almost as wide as the road, but lined with beech-trees whose branches interlaced over a solitary pathway, mossy and grass-grown by turns. Whither did it lead? Was

it the avenue to a gentleman's house, or to a farm, or to ruins ? It twisted in its descent, and its double masses of great trees could be followed amongst the fields till with them they melted into the blue distance.

Louarn did not venture farther ; he drew the little cart into the shade of one of the first trees, put Lucienne on the ground, and took out the big loaf.

“ Turn and turn about ! ” he said.

He sat down, and realized that he was hungry by his appreciation of the good Plœuc bread.

With his knife, whose blade was worn and bent by use, he cut great mouthfuls for himself, and smaller ones for Lucienne and Noémi—Lucienne standing, Noémi sitting in front of him—giving each her bit with a loving word or a whistling call when Noémi's brown head or Lucienne's blonde one was turned away.

Little Noémi ! She was so young that to make her understand he was fain to put on a cheerful air and invent things that cost him dear to put into words.

Already she showed herself only too prone

to guess at the trouble and to talk about it; and as Louarn answered her he kept thinking : " She mustn't be allowed to think that she has no mother now," but he lied so sorrowfully, so awkwardly, that she asked the same questions again and again.

Joël began to cry in the cart, and his father said to himself : " How shall I ever be able to keep him with me on the journey ? "

He took the baby up and walked about, rocking him in his arms; that pacified the child, and soon, in the heavy August heat, under the hedge of gorse near the high-road, the father and his three children were all asleep, the flies buzzing about them.

Half-past twelve, one o'clock, half-past one.

Louarn awoke with a start at the sound of a loud voice saying :

" Who are you, my man ? "

And at the same time a hand, gloved but solid and powerful, took him by the collar.

" Come, wake up ! Do you come from hereabouts ? "

" No, Monsieur," said Louarn angrily.

" From where, then ? "

“ I won’t tell you.”

“ You won’t ? ”

“ No.”

The two men looked at each other, one still seated, the other loosing his hold and standing upright.

This last had got out of a low pony-carriage; he had a full fresh-coloured face, with authoritative hazel eyes.

You had but to see the freedom of his movements and the easy fashion in which he put out his hand to help Noémi to get up, to feel sure he was well-off.

He wore checked woollen stockings, ample breeches to suit his ample person, a short coat to match, and a straw hat.

At first Louarn fancied this wealthy person was rebuking him for resting on private property and disfiguring the landscape with his three poorly-clad children and the wretched little wooden cart; and this roused his Breton independent spirit and bad temper. But he speedily saw his mistake. This rich man must surely be his countryman and aware of that kind of haughty nature, for there was an almost tender pity in his look as he counted

over the items of Louarn's baggage and said in the same rough voice as at first :

" I don't care whether you tell me who you are or not ; you may keep your secrets to yourself, and I'll help you just the same as if I knew them. Only just tell me if you want work ? "

The eyes of both fell upon the handle of the shovel sticking up at the back of Louarn's little cart.

" I've only just started on a journey," said Louarn ; " I haven't hired myself out anywhere yet. But if you have a shed ?——"

" I have. Go down the avenue, and tell the foreman I've hired you."

He walked a few steps towards his carriage, then turned back.

" Tell my farmer's wife, too, to look after those brats and to open the barn for you."

For a long moment he gazed into Jean Louarn's eyes—those sad, blue-grey eyes ; then he shrugged his shoulders.

" Look here—you can say that I know you."

It was true, he had recognized the anguish that asks nothing from humanity.

The next moment he was gone, and Louarn stood alone on the beech-lined slope. He spread out on the palm of his hand the money he had put into an old tobacco-pouch, and counted out four francs forty centimes.

“It’s little enough !” he muttered ; “I’d better begin work at once, since one can at least keep oneself here.”

He felt no desire for work, hard necessity alone induced him to it, and he sighed, remembering how last winter he had hastened to rise from his bed to reclaim the waste so as to prepare a sweeter, richer and more joyful return for her who had not returned.

After a moment he was seized by so irresistible a longing to win approval, to feel that another shared his thought as always of old, that having none near him but Noémi able to understand, he went over to the child as she sat digging out the moss to make a grotto.

“My little Noémi,” he said, “do you know what I am going to do ?”

Complete childish trust, a little love, something of flattered pride were in her smile, and sent a ray of light into his heart as when of old Donatienne had smiled.

“ I’m going to stay several days here; you’ll be able to rest and play. Would you like that ? ”

The long lashes over her brown eyes were lowered and made answer for her.

“ Yes—I should like it very much.”

“ There’ll be a house for you, and I shall work. Of course I must go on working, mustn’t I ? ”

“ Oh ! yes——”

She did not know the exact meaning of his question or her answer ; it was too much for her six-years’-old intelligence ; but her smile suddenly disappeared, her face lengthened, and from her wide-open eyes spoke a fixed idea and a hope.

“ And after that——” she asked, “ shall we go back to Ros Grignon ? ”

“ No, my darling.”

The little face fell.

“ Then shall we go to see Maman where she is ? ”

“ Perhaps.”

“ In Paris ? ”

He turned away as he answered :

“ Later on, perhaps, later on, my darling.”

And Louarn thought to himself : “ How she thinks it all out already ! I shall have to be very careful with her ; it must be almost as painful to her as if she were grown up.”

“ Come along, little ones ! ” he said aloud ; “ get up. We must go down here. One must live somehow ! ”

And so they went downwards between the great trees planted of old beside the road which had seen the passing of troops of men-at-arms, dwarfed by distance as they went their way beneath the thickly interlacing boughs, and the grating of the cart-wheels mingled with the chirpings of the grasshoppers.

It was one of those hot, windless days the ocean at times accords to Brittany to allow the buckwheat and the apples to begin to ripen.

Before it ended, before the setting of the sun, long delayed in August, Louarn had set to work, and, with his mates, was labouring at the job for which they had been hired.

It was easy enough.

He had put on the sabots the bailiff had allowed him to keep from the Ros Grignon sale, and now, with fifty other men, labourers

or tramps like himself, he was clearing out a pond which the prolonged heat of the summer had dried up.

They had set to work across the pond, and the gang were working in a narrow space in the midst of a basin of mud some acres in extent, soft and oozing in places, in others hard and cracked—a mass of roots, dried wood, last autumn's leaves, slimy froth, and pools of fresh water, its clammy surface scored with the tracks of worms trying to reach the still damp centre.

Each labourer had a wheelbarrow, and wading through the mire, shovelled the mud along in heaps two feet high; then, his barrow full, pushed it to the bank to empty it.

There were men there of all ages, from all sorts of places, with all sorts of garments, and of all sorts of types—wolves, foxes, dogs, pigs, tiger-cats; and in the eyes of well-nigh all could be read the same warning: “Beware of me!”

They shovelled or rested at their pleasure, taking no notice of the contractor's remarks—a big fellow in a smock who looked like a corpulent butcher.

They were already on terms of acquaintance, though hired but yesterday; they shouted to one another, they swore at the water-lily stems, thick as cables, they had to pull up; they swore at the stench, at the owner, at the heat of the sun, and now and then, having struck a mud-trapped eel with a blow of a shovel-handle, they chucked it into the field beyond with peals of laughter.

Several ceased work without giving any reason and went off. The real poverty-stricken amongst them worked hard and earned pay for the rest.

Jean Louarn was one of these last. At his usual slow pace he had come, shovel on shoulder, gazing with like indifference at the pond into which he was to go and the mates who were there before him. He exchanged a word or two with the foreman of the gang, took his wheelbarrow and went down into the slough; then with the sure and regular movements of a machine, he alternately shovelled and lifted the mud, a deep trench forming in front of him as he worked on.

What did he care whether his work was such as this rather than harvesting or harrow-

ing, now that he could take no pleasure in any done away from home and merely to earn the bread that must be eaten alone ?

But at least no one had asked his name; no one spoke to him, and amidst the noise he could go on dreaming as on the roads a while ago.

One thing gave him some comfort; the children had been received at the Farmhouse by an old woman who had said to a very young one :

“ The little creatures are poor, Anna; you must look after them just like ours; make them some broth. You must give the two little girls a bed and put the baby in the cot by your side; it’s so sad when children have no mother.”

For Louarn, unable to tell the real truth, had said the children were motherless.

And as he toiled he thought of the handsome girl of the farm, and in his mind’s eye, saw her carrying off Joël in motherly arms, cheerfully ignoring the trouble he must give her.

The little ones would be happy—that was certain, so their father felt no regret at having

accepted this offer of work at the very beginning of the journey.

He worked on without pause; still when he raised his head he felt a vague surprise at realizing that he was not yet quite free of the familiar landscape.

Beyond the withered rushes that ringed the pond, the ground rose a little; meadows lay spread on every side alternating with waste lands, bushes, and fallows grey or brown—wide, wind-swept spaces where flocks of sheep wandered, bounded in the distance by rows of beech-trees looking like masses of rounded rocks.

Behind one of these stood the house and the farm, both built of the same granite and of the same period, and joined together.

In this spot, which resembled a bay dug out by the sea and then left dry, Louarn felt he was not a stranger.

No doubt the objects round him were not absolutely like those he had left behind him, but they spoke to his heart in the same fashion, and over all there breathed the rhythmic air that rises and falls with the tides.

Yes, there was something of home still

around him, and, at first, Louarn believed it would help him to live.

But the first night fell—fell swiftly and sadly; from the pond and the earth around, vapours arose to meet it, and in the fading light the place took on so wild and barren a look that it startled Louarn. Leaning on his shovel, he watched the crimson glow that hung above the beech-trees as it slowly made its way down their smoke-coloured trunks.

Out there, towards the setting sun, lived his grief; out there, somewhere in the twilight, stood a little farm upon a hillock, where others now had a home. Others! Oh, poor Louarn! and so near you still! A child had been able to walk the distance. The scent of your buckwheat might almost reach you; but strangers will harvest it! Where you once were, they are now; they will sleep where you slept. Look! is not that the Forest of Plœuc in front of you? Is not that the waste? Is not this the hour when to the labourer, weary from his day's work, the door opened and let him see at a glance the walls, the fire, the beloved wife, the cradles—all that made up his life?

Poor Louarn ! The kisses of by-gone days bleed like wounds ; the dread of to-morrow falls with the dark ; strength to forgive dwindles with the day.

“ It won’t do for me to stay here long,” thought Louarn ; “ it reminds me too much of home.”

“ You’re in trouble, you Breton,” said a voice.

Louarn turned his head slowly, and on the edge of the grass he perceived a flat-nosed labourer who was nicknamed the Boulonnais, putting on the blue linen jacket he had taken off while working.

“ How do you know I’m in trouble ? ” he asked.

“ Because you stay on here after the others have gone ! You confounded ass ! ”

The Breton merely shrugged his shoulders at the insult, while the man hurried off, his hands in his trousers’ pockets, which they distended like a petticoat.

And, in fact, those groups of shadows walking in ever-widening directions, were his mates.

Last of all, Louarn himself left the pond,

and wiping his hands and his sabots with a wisp of grass, he went back to his children at the farm and to sleep on the straw in the stable.

So a week went by; on the eighth day there came a hot haze which withered the leaves and exhausted the men. On the two previous days the Boulonnais had kept on jeering at Jean Louarn, who had refused to join the rest at their midday meal, eating it alone and apart, and never laughing.

To-day, seeing that Louarn was more surly and silent than ever, and having failed to rouse him, anyhow to irritate him, he took to inventing, for he knew nothing certain about this taciturn tramp.

“ Well, mates,” he began, “ the job’s half done. A good riddance. I, for one, shan’t regret the shed, nor my neighbour in the pond. He must have murdered somebody, that Breton fellow, to make him so ill-tempered, unless his wife——”

“ Hold your tongue ! ” said Louarn’s deep voice.

But the other, excited all the more by seeing Louarn aroused at last, went on :

“ Unless his wife has cast him off ! ”

“ She’s dead ! ” shouted Louarn.

“ If that was true you wouldn’t bawl it out like that,” said the other; “ just you look at him ! ”

The Boulonnais had no time to say more; Louarn, casting away his shovel, had drawn tight the leather belt which supported his trousers, struck his hands together twice as a preliminary of fight, and with outstretched arms and suddenly broadened shoulders towered above the labourer, who had pulled himself together and was on guard, his fists against his chest and his eyes wild with fury.

A roar of shouts, cheers, hatred, went up.

“ Kill the Breton, Boulon, kill him ! ”

Then silence fell and in the circus with its walls of mud, fifty men watched for a treacherous blow.

They had but a second to wait.

The Boulonnais, with head down, rushed at Louarn intending to butt him in the stomach. Slipping aside, Louarn evaded the blow; he stooped with tensely-stiffened loins, and seizing his foe as he came on by the middle, he picked him up, lifted him with his

strong wrists, threw him over his shoulder, and then, swinging him thrice with outstretched arms—while three shouts went up—flung him into the mud, wherein the tramp sank, his face striking the bottom, a dozen yards from the edge.

Then Louarn turned to the spectators of the fight, several of whom were coming on, lifting up shovels or pulling out knives.

“ Whose turn next ? ” he said.

“ Mine ! ” cried a few voices.

But not one of them dared approach the Breton, who stood shaking the mud from his fingers and panting ; every muscle of his body tense and ready for use, while he waited a fresh adversary.

When he found that no one came on or dared to venture within reach of his arm, he picked up his shovel and made his way out of the circle which parted before him.

“ Where are you going, le Breton ? ” asked the overseer, who had been an interested spectator of the fight, but now resumed his authority ; “ where are you going ? Shake hands with the Boulonnais, your mate, and let everybody go back to work ! ”

He stood somewhat in awe of his men, like the *vaqueros* who gaze at the bull-fight from a distance.

But Louarn went on his way, his shovel on his shoulder, up towards the farm, faintly visible like a somewhat deeper shadow behind the rows of trees.

"I must go on farther," he muttered; "I won't have any one speaking to me about her. Oh, how she haunts me still! They guessed at my trouble. I must go still farther away!"

After he had given his directions and everything was ready in the farmyard with its arched gateway of granite green with the winter's damps; when Lucienne and Joël had been once more laid in the hand-cart, Louarn, as he raised his hat in farewell, in the shadows of the hall caught sight of the handsome tall girl, and she was crying.

Her eyes had followed the little ones so tenderly, she had so well earned the farewell greeting Lucienne and Noémi were sending her; she would so have loved the baby, little Joël whom she had rocked to sleep and dressed and carried out in her arms, to stay until he could chatter, that he could not

help feeling a sort of regret and almost of affection.

“ *She* wouldn’t have thought it possible to leave them, if she’d been their mother,” he said to himself.

But that seemed to him an evil thought and he put it away from him at once; and saying good-bye to the old woman of the farm who was nearest to the threshold, he took up the ring of hazel-wood which served as handle to the pole of the cart, and across the manure of the yard came the muffled sound of a heavy step and a little light one, and the grating of the turning wheels.

That night they slept at another farm, less hospitable than the one they had left, where Louarn was abused for coming at so late an hour, and made to wait; but they were not turned away.

There was always a suspicion of fear in the permission given him by the peasants to sleep upon the straw—fear of revenge, fear of fire, fear of some evil trick—but there was also a holy pity, remnant of that divine charity which even now at dusk in the country-places of France opens doors to the wayfarer.

Thus on the morrow, and for the whole of the next week, he found a shelter. He journeyed on towards the east, telling no one whither he was going, still less the cause of his journey. All he said was :

“ I’m going to Vendée for the potato-digging.”

That was enough for the simple folk who questioned him — La Vendée, meaning all the rest of France, so large and open to the sun, has always been looked upon by the inhabitants of the Peninsula as the land of plenty.

The weather remained fine on the whole ; Louarn walked on for two or three days at a stretch, then stopped at some farm to work for bread.

Each morning from some spot or other came the rumbling of threshing-machines, and it was enough to go up and say : “ Do you want me ? ” to be given a place amongst the crowd of men and women as numerous as guests at a wedding who surrounded the machine and fed it.

Everywhere, too, despite the weariness of the overworked housewives who had to get

ready the meals for so many, the children were taken in, and some one—more or less tardily, more or less willingly—found time to cook the broth and wash the baby's scanty linen.

Almost invariably the men, seeing the little cart, said no; but the women said yes, and let it come in and stand in the shadow of the ricks which quivered to the clamour of the bands and wheels of the threshing-machine.

But when Louarn was leaving the farm, looking at Joël, they never failed to warn him, prophesying :

“ You'll kill him, my poor fellow ! When the cold weather comes you'll see what will happen. You can't travel all over France with a baby ! ”

He made no answer.

In spite of the children's slow pace they were getting on. Louarn avoided the towns as much as possible, partly from shyness, being slow of speech, partly from dread of the police, for the instinctive distrust of the resident always felt by the wanderer, weighed heavily upon him.

He avoided the villages, too, because, as

you entered them, you were confronted by a notice that begging was forbidden; and although he did not beg, he was aware that his willingness to work would not be taken into account—he would be just the tramp, that nondescript being, a member of the great body of paupers, prowlers, thieves and company whose reputation is an established and venerable fact.

And in proportion as he became more and more a stranger in the country, so the more he became an object of suspicion.

Before long, in fact, the jacket braided with black velvet, the big hat, the wide, worn trousers of blue drugget, began to look odd, proving that the people no longer recognized this as their ancient costume.

The character of the soil altered; the ploughed fields, heavy with clay, no longer wore the look of purple or sandy dust or powdered salt of the ploughed fields of Brittany; the earth brought forth vegetables instead of flowers; the unused pastures, the paths leading nowhither, the desolate fields from which the master is always absent, lessened in number, and there were fewer

traces of the wind's doings, fewer distorted elm-trees and more upstanding oaks.

But it was the hills above all that were of a different kind; no rocks projected from them; no brooks were narrowed between them; the north-west wind did not harass them; their crops were not beaten down. Little or no buckwheat now, less gorse, heather getting scarce, the scent of mint increasing; the salt-laden air, that air which awakens the spirit of adventure in the hearts of men, blew no more, and the wind lost its rhythm, and the tide that of old used to rise and fall with it rose and fell no longer on the ear, and the song it sang was broken.

Louarn was well aware that these days were his days of farewell, and he walked slower and looked about him more, as if seeking everywhere for the eyes of departing friends.

On one of these days of slow travel, he was overtaken by torrents of rain. He sought the shelter of a slope, and against the bank of a ditch at the side of the grass-grown road he drew the cart and the two children in it.

A hollow trunk, its split dead bark veined

with living wood, rose above them, and Noémi crouched down, her head amongst the brambles, while Louarn, a little to one side, half-in, half-out of shelter, sat with bowed back, gazing at the grass, awaiting the end of the shower.

But the storm grew worse, the wind beat in upon them and made the shelter useless. The ditch filled with water, the wet boughs ceased to protect them, their drenched garments clung to their shoulders.

Louarn saw that Joël was half frozen; he took off his jacket and threw it over the children. Alas! the air grew colder and colder and the little hands beneath the covering shivered more and more.

In an hour's time, when he lifted the arm Joël had thrust out of the wooden box, he realized that fever had seized upon his youngest child.

Then, leaving his jacket to protect the two little ones, whom it well-nigh hid, he drew the cart from the ditch and went up the path to the highway.

Now, contrary to his custom, he wanted to reach the nearest village and beg for help,

for in his ignorance, he was more easily alarmed than a mother

Noémi trotted along through the mud, her skirt turned up over her head. The rain fell so thick and straight that they could see nothing beyond the hedges on either side of the road.

There was room for but one thought in Louarn's mind: "If I can only find help for my little one!"

He did not know even the name of any town he might come upon; but, happily, after walking for three quarters of an hour, he and Noémi caught sight of roofs on both sides of the road, roofs upon which the rain was pattering, the dancing drops making a halo round them.

"At last," said Louarn, "you'll be able to get warm, my poor little Noémi, and we shall find a bed for your brother. He's got the fever."

He hurried on, running almost, but impeded by his soaked trousers which stuck to his knees.

Two women who were looking from a window at the overflowing gutter and the sky

where the wind, and the clouds, and the sun were struggling together, let the curtains fall when they caught sight of Louarn and the movement he made to approach them.

Twice the little cart started in their direction and twice returned to the middle of the road.

A third woman was standing on her doorstep sweeping out the water that had got into her house with a broom.

Between the sweeps she realized that an appeal for charity was approaching, and she took the initiative.

“Go on,” she said, “I’ve nothing to give you.”

Louarn, his teeth chattering, began :

“It’s my child——”

“Well, I’ve got children of my own !” screamed the woman ; “go on farther !”

Farther on there stood a carpenter, who had gone on working his plane, with regular movements up and down, framed in an arched shop-front, opening three feet from the ground.

When the poor fellow stood still in the middle of the road, afraid to venture in vain to cross the distance between them, the workman gave him a good-natured look, which

simply meant that he was glad to be out of the wet himself, his feet amongst the shavings and to be sure of work the year long.

Of course he didn't wish to be rude to the pale-faced haggard tramp who asked him :

“ Can any one take me in here ? ”

“ Begging is forbidden in this parish, my friend,” said the carpenter.

He had the face of an old soldier now a householder, full, with a long tuft of beard and a pink complexion streaked with white like painted china.

“ I'm not begging,” replied Louarn; “ I have a sick child with me.”

A voice from the obscurity of the shop at the back, broke in with :

“ Perhaps it's something infectious. Take care, Alexandre; we don't know anything about them.”

“ Hold your tongue, old woman ! ” said the carpenter.

He turned round to Louarn who had bent over the little carriage, and with his wet hands over which his tattered shirt-sleeves fell stiffly, had lifted up the jacket he had thrown over Joël and Lucienne.

It was still raining, and in the half-light of

the covering, Lucienne put up her bright and laughing little face, while Joël's, yellow as wax, showed no change.

"Just look at him!" said Louarn.

The carpenter's grimace expressed much; he had seen babies die before now.

"There are two doctors in the town," he said; "try one of them. One's an old man, not a bad sort—rather out of date——"

"They wouldn't take care of him for me," said Louarn; "that's not what I want. I want some one who will give him a bed."

"I don't know any one."

"Or a hospital?"

"There's a hospital of course, but it's only for the people about here. If it had to take in everybody—everybody just passing by, you know——"

Louarn let the jacket fall over his children, and stretching out his hand in the rain which whipped his cheeks, he cried out:

"Oh, you hard-hearted people! Where do you want me to go? I can't let him die!"

"Hard-hearted yourself! Who forces you to tramp the country and beg—with your brats too, to excite pity. Be off—we know your sort——"

“ Here you tramp,” said a hoarse voice, “ where are your papers ? ”

A big man in a knitted jacket, whose speech and manner told of immense assurance, was looking at the Breton who was carefully turning the little carriage back again.

“ Yes, I say ! Where are your papers ? ” You can’t answer ? You haven’t got any ? If you take my advice you’ll pack yourself off ! You’re right to turn back—and be off as quick as you can ! ”

And he laughed the contemptuous laugh of the small official who thinks all regulations right, and knowing himself backed by force, is dead to the reproach of Christ.

He never failed with his question : “ Have you got your papers ? ” and it invariably succeeded, the poor wretch slunk off and the town was rid of his presence and his rags.

And Louarn did the same ; he had begun by resisting, but when he understood the facts, he grew afraid, and harnessing himself again to his beggar’s cart he lifted the pole from the mud.

The keeper was still laughing, his hands in his waistcoat-pockets.

But Jean Louarn suddenly straightened

himself, dread of seeing his child die had driven the blood from his face and forced his glittering eyes deeper into their orbits.

He leapt across the gutter, went up to the house, and bringing his gaunt hands together, leant over the half-door of the shop, his head and shoulders close against the carpenter, who paused in his work.

“ My friend,” he said, “ my friend, I don’t know you, but you will take pity on me ! ”

In his anguish convention was forgotten and he said “ *tu.*”

“ If you have a child of your own, take pity on mine, and come with me.”

“ What for ? ” asked the carpenter.

“ I’ll tell you,” answered Louarn; “ only come—come at once ! I am a man like you—like you I had a home of my own once—and now I have nothing ! ”

Words such as these, words telling of such veritable anguish, such an appeal to brotherhood, the master-workman had not often heard, and they touched him; his spirit, so dull as a rule, was troubled, and his hand betrayed his emotion as it grasped a handful of shavings and clasped it as if it were the hand of a brother.

But the conscious will, slower to work and affected by the presence of that listening bystander, hesitated still.

And Louarn, receiving no answer, and seeing only an old workman standing motionless with bent head and up to the knees in white wood-shavings, turned away hastily and went off.

The little carriage moved on again with its complaining creak.

He had gone but a few yards when he heard the steps of a man hurrying to catch him up, but he would not appear to notice it—it was probably the keeper intending to see him off the town-boundary.

But on his rain-numbed shoulder he felt the touch of some one walking beside him and trying to keep step with him, and the man was saying :

“ Well now, what is it ? ”

“ Oh ! what is it ? ” said Louarn. “ No, what *was* it ? ” and he went on without even casting a look at the man to whom he had appealed, so that the man began to think he was mad.

“ What is it, my poor fellow ? ” he asked once more. “ I’ve left my work to help you. What do you want ? ”

They had already left the village behind them and were walking along the sodden road, the carpenter with bowed head as if expecting a sad story to be confided to him, Louarn as usual, facing the wind, and both beaten by the rain which came on in sudden gusts and ceased as suddenly.

Then at last the Breton began to speak, very low, breathing out his words towards the scurrying clouds, and sometimes pausing for a dozen steps, when his heart failed him or when he feared he might speak Donatienne's name.

"I've had troubles," he said, "troubles I can't speak about—but—you *must* believe me they were through no fault of mine. I worked hard; I did no one any harm; I owned a pretty little farm. And now I am carrying about with me all that's left of my home—and my little Joël is dying—you've only to lift off the jacket I put over him and feel his cheek—he'll die if you don't find some charitable person who will take him in and look after him! Tell me of some one!"

For a moment the carpenter was silent, looking about him, then he said:

"Let's go up here—I've got an idea."

They turned aside to the left where the ground rose and formed a long, bare hill a little like the hills of Brittany, and crowned by a group of fir-trees.

A ray of sunshine pierced the clouds and raced brightly from one end of the drenched plain to the other.

Louarn squeezed Noémi's hand as he went on :

" I can take with me only this one, and Lucienne who can walk a little. But when I find work I shall earn money enough to have Joël back and to pay any one who has kept him. I promise you that."

" Where are you going ? " asked his companion.

" To look for work."

" But where is there any to be got ? "

" In la Vendée."

" That's what every man who goes past here says, but we don't see them come back again ! " answered the carpenter.

But his confidence grew as he listened to Louarn. His white chin-tuft wagged over the hedges once or twice as if he were looking for some one.

The rain had ceased, it grew warmer and

the damp earth steamed; those whose work had been interrupted by the wet hurried out again to finish jobs already begun.

The carpenter cast the eye of an acquaintance at the folk picking up chestnuts, or harrowing, or driving flocks along each side of the lane, but he did not stop.

At last, as the sky cleared, he caught sight of two women in a field cutting grass with a reaping-hook; they had not noticed him, but he called to them and they came up.

He showed them the fever-stricken child as he lay at the bottom of the little Ros Grignon cart, and explained matters.

"I'll answer for the man," he said; "do just what he wants."

The elder of the two poor women asked :

"How much will he pay ?"

They discussed the question; but while they were trying to come to some agreement, the younger woman stooped, made a cradle of her arms, and lifted the child to her bosom, saying :

"I'll take him for my own !"

It was an act of adoption.

An hour later, amongst the pine-trees at the top of the hill, Louarn set forth from the

farm where he was leaving Joël. When he had gone a short distance, yet too far to turn back himself, he said to Noémi :

“ Go and kiss him again.”

The little girl ran back to the house for a moment and out again quickly.

“ Go again ! ” said the father.

Again she came back, and again, for the third time he sent her back, saying :

“ Cuddle him as if you weren’t going to see him again for a whole week ! ”

For he had not told the child of his plans.

She came back radiant.

Then he approached the man who had brought him hither, and uncovering his head, thanked him in few words, speaking not one too many ; afterwards he asked him :

“ Which is my road now ? ”

The other’s fortitude was even less than Jean Louarn’s ; he could not speak but only pointed to the east.

And Louarn went down the hill, having now but two of his children with him.

He walked faster and faster, never looking back so long as any light was left. He was like one distraught, talking to the objects

round him, saying to the trees : “ See what she has driven me to ! ”

He gave way to rage such as his spirit had never before experienced ; he accused Donatienne ; all the woes he had suffered, was suffering, and must still suffer, he laid to her charge.

“ Wicked woman ! I’ve been forced to give up your baby ; your child is crying, your husband is on the tramp, and look at Noémi, her shoes are worn to bits ! ”

But when his tears at last ceased he ended by saying :

“ Still she doesn’t know what has happened to me. If she had known all the harm she’s done, perhaps she would have come ! ”

So he travelled onwards, farther and farther from the spot which was in fact the boundary of Brittany.

In the days that followed, he saw no more waste lands and wine became his drink, for the farms where he found work were prosperous. He was no longer questioned as to the place he came from, but he was kept at a distance.

“ A rolling stone isn’t worth much,” people said to him ; “ and you Bretons are so fond of

your apple-trees and your barren fields that it's only the worst of you that forsake them."

He found fewer and poorer lodgings; he had to sleep in pig-styes; several times he had to pay for the night's shelter, not only at the inns into which the cold forced him, but for the hayloft some inhabitant let him use. Hearts seemed harder now; the year was declining and already the nights were cold.

Truly the way, as it lengthened, did not become less difficult as Louarn had hoped.

Sometimes the tramp pondered over the many days that had gone by since he set forth, and ignorant of his exact whereabouts he endeavoured to think out a distance commensurate with the time it had taken—seven weeks, eight weeks, nine weeks. But he never succeeded.

Often, too, he tried in vain to get hired at farms; he was so thin that his strength was doubted.

He would ask: "Are there any potatoes to dig here?" and the answer would be:

"Of course there are, but we don't want any more hands," or he got no answer at all.

And he thought to himself: "I can't be in

Vendée yet, for the land is no better here than at home.”

Often, too, he was beset by evil thoughts; at times it was the temptation to kill himself—to tie a stone round his neck and throw himself into a pond; sometimes, and more frequently, it was some obscure and tormenting moral weakness and a regret for all the good he had ever done.

“What have I gained,” he thought, “by loving that Donatienne? Why didn’t I do like her, who’s made a fool of me? Here am I, tramping the roads, poorer than those I used to give alms to, burdened with the sole charge of the children that are hers as well as mine, and obliged to say thank-you for a bed of straw! If I had chosen—yes, if I had chosen——”

He thought of the suggestive words spoken to him by that Plœuc girl—the girl Donatienne herself had engaged to look after the house during the first months of separation. He was haunted by Annette Domerc’s sly laugh and by that look of hers which had left a sort of secret and poisoned sting in the depths of his spirit.

As a rule he shook off these fancies pretty

quickly, and remorsefully looked about for something to support him. Then he would give Noémi or Lucienne a score of kisses, speaking gentle words to them, and trying to make them laugh, as if the children's laughter meant forgiveness for the man; and the children were vaguely perplexed by these sudden endearments, which presently grew rarer and rarer.

And from hill to hill, over heavy soils, past woods and villages, he was descending to the south-east. He had passed into Mayenne, to the right of Ernée and the left of Grand-Jouan.

On certain days, upon the hills, he was astonished at feeling a saltiness in the air; for he was near the great valley that leads to the heart of France, and, without knowing it, was nearer to the sea than in the middle of his journey.

One evening in October, walking had been difficult because of the rain which had begun to rot the roads, falling in long-continued showers under a gentle wind.

His thoughts ran constantly upon the sowing—for which it was the season, and his hand opened and shut as if upon the grains of wheat it was condemned never more to touch;

he let go the handle of the little cart, then took it up again. There was a feeling of storm in the air, but without sound.

Louarn was hungry, Noémi was hungry, Lucienne was hungry.

They were mounting a hill whose top must be very far off, for at its summit could be seen the tilt of a waggon jolting along and looking no bigger than a rush-basket.

The day was dying, but it was one of those days when the sun sets one can't tell where, or at what precise moment; only the sky showed paler spaces, over which flew smoke-like clouds, to the right of the disappearing waggon.

Not a roof to be seen, no human presence or voice; only darkening fields, newly dug, and divided by the vines which had become more common beside the road of adventure the Breton travelled during the last week.

Beyond the vines, some hundred yards from the hill-top, a copse of swaying, stunted oak-trees drank in the moisture with its leaves, its mosses, its funguses, its lichens, its porous soil.

"We must get to that wretched shelter," thought Louarn; "anyhow there'll be some

bits of wood for my cooking, and the children ought to have something hot."

It took him a good quarter of an hour to reach the copse, which he entered by a dip in the slope, leaving the little cart at the edge of one of those small circular spaces left by the charcoal-burners after burning the wood they had cut down. Then he took from the cart an old saucepan, a bottle of water and five big turnips some one had given him.

Noémi sat down at the foot of the oak which had the fewest pools of water about its roots, and seating her sister by her side, knotted up the ends of their two grey shawls which had come undone, and set to work peeling the turnips with her pocket-knife, while her father went out to look for dead wood.

When the children were left to themselves, they began to laugh, with sweet little laughs like the notes of birds falling upon the dying day and the rain and reaching the path close by and the father who walked thereon in a circle, afraid of leaving any great distance between himself and them.

And, at the sound, he felt as if the last

remnant of his courage failed him *They* could not realize that they had left the Breton land; that they moved in a hostile world; that the winter was near; that the weary search for those chance lodgings, the uncertainty of life, increased as time went; *they* did not suffer the sense of suffocation, the oppression of the mortal darkness that haunted the wood and might well have caused even a happy man to weep !

With a couple of handfuls of damp twigs and three of moss that he had squeezed like a sponge, Louarn came back to the children.

The saucepan was full of water and the peeled quarters of the turnips; he picked up some stones and made a hearth on which to put the wood, then struck one of the matches he kept in his old horn tobacco-box.

The wood would not catch; there was nothing but a puff of smoke which disappeared, beaten down and absorbed by the drenching mist.

"We must have some dry leaves," said Louarn; "take the matches, Noémi. I'll go and look for some leaves. It's going to be very cold, to-night, my poor children."

He was standing erect, his hair clinging to

his bare head, and he was looking towards the west where there still remained a long streak of yellowish light—like a crushed adder—a last gleam of light between the earth and the low-lying clouds, so low-lying that there seemed no air beneath them.

Out there, Louarn, out there, in old days when evening fell, you used to find a bright fire lighted by another, and a fond greeting, and loving arms held out to you.

“Come,” he said low to himself, “I mustn’t ever look back there again now, never, never. It will be a cold night, my poor children,” he said once more, and he turned away to look for dry leaves.

In her turn Noémi was trying to strike the matches and laughing as, one by one, they went out on the soft air and the falling rain. Her childish laugh slid out into the vast darkness.

All at once her laughter ceased, and her father, some fifty yards away, heard her speaking. The canopy of cloud was so thick and the darkness so dense that he could not see her; he could scarce see his own hands groping about the ground, or the outline of the branches against the smoke-grey sky.

She was speaking—Noémi—to whom ? Not to her sister, for the voice of children speaking to each other differs from that they use to an older person. Noémi speaking in the copse, answering low-spoken questions !

The wind did not carry to that side ; Louarn drew near, stooping cautiously, his heart beating with anger.

If it should be a tramp, he would fight him. Why ? Why, because he had forbidden Noémi to answer tramps ; because his heart to-night is running over with hatred born of suffering.

He turned, clutching the leaves he had collected and walked noiselessly to the charcoal-burners' ring.

Three figures were bending over the fire, two small, one large, and he heard a voice saying :

“ Give me the matches, child ; I'll light it all right.”

“ Don't give them up, Noémi ! ” cried Louarn ; “ I forbid you to ! ”

As he stood there, there came a glimmer of phosphorus, and then a flame shielded between two big hands, and in the sudden, quick radiance, from the rain-filled darkness—its

features drawn in strong ruddy lines—stood out full and distinct, the three-quarters view of a face, for one moment, to be swallowed up in the gloom the next.

It was a woman; she looked towards Louarn, saying :

“ Would you like me to make the soup ? ”

“ No ! ” cried Louarn, “ be off ! I don’t want to have anything to do with you ! ”

They were scarcely three yards apart and almost of the same height ; the woman stooped, taking no notice of his refusal, and lifted a handful of wood. There rose a cloud of smoke and then a flame under the saucepan which lit up the grass, and the stooping children and the face of the woman as she sat on her heels looking the Breton over from head to foot with a laugh full of extraordinary impertinence, boldness and curiosity.

A second time she said : “ Would you like me to make the soup ? ”

“ No ! ”

But he made no gesture of dismissal.

She had abundant black, curly hair coiled on the top of her head and wore no cap.

For a long moment she gazed at Louarn.

The fire burst into a blaze; then the woman got up lightly, and still keeping her eyes on Louarn said—but now in a heart-piercing voice :

“ Tell me—don’t you want me to make the soup—every day—as long as you please ? You can’t keep these children alive ! you know you can’t ! ”

He made no answer and walked away from the circle of light into the darkness under the pretext of collecting more wood to feed the fire. But all the while he kept looking at her as she stood, still young, ugly, and vigorous, in the dancing light.

And when he came back he said nothing more, but he stayed, and he ate the soup she had made.

* * * * *

Three days later the travellers were going down a sandy road. They were four now. The woman—turned out of some travelling caravan it might be, or perhaps lately liberated from some house of correction, the wanderer who had joined another like herself—carried nothing with her but a bundle of linen slung upon her arm. Little Noémi was with her,

walking timidly beside her, sometimes running for fear of falling behind, for the woman walked fast, never waiting for Louarn who, on the slope, had to hold back the little carriage which was heavier now than when it started. As of old it was he who always dragged Lucienne. He was more gloomy than ever, never spoke to the children, and the look of kindness and resignation he had worn in earlier days, was his no longer, not even when he looked on the companion he had accepted.

As for her, she took but little notice of him; she strode along at the side of the road, eyes for ever on the alert—the eyes of the habitual vagrant. When they passed near an orchard, she jumped the hedge, to pick up apples or pears or gather bunches of grapes.

Still at a word she would busy herself with the children, giving them to eat, or carrying them over difficult places where the little cart might upset, or mending their frocks or stockings when a halt was made.

She did it all indifferently, showing no eagerness, and making no objection; and she was hardly ever without a bit of grass at the

corner of her mouth, chewing it between her white teeth.

So in silence they went down the sandy, twisting road—Louarn in the middle drawing Lucienne, the woman on the left, Noémi behind her.

It was a beautiful day; the luminous air seemed as if it wished to bathe and heal all autumn's wounds. Vines spread along both sides of the hedges which were now thinning and full of wayfaring-tree, barberry and hops.

Almost everywhere the vintage was going on, and the smell of the new wine was wafted down the hillsides towards the poplars and the yellowing willows below the vineyards.

Never before had Louarn been so acutely sensible of the heavy perfume which, for a month, floats about the hills of the warmer and hotter provinces of France, and it made him feel giddy.

But when at times the western wind blew cool, the gaunt figure stood erect once more, and Louarn gazed at the wind-swept sky as if greeting a companion, and an old love was re-born in his spirit.

At the last turning the tramp stopped short,

and his silent lips murmured for his own ear alone :

“ The sea ! ”

At the bottom of a meadow as level as a road, there flowed a great river, as majestic as one of those arms of the sea that intersect the granite rocks of Brittany, with their tiny torrents twisted like corkscrews.

It had its sandy beaches, its little bays, and its rippling tides.

And Louarn, whom none of all the sights he had seen on his travels had greatly moved, taking a deep breath, exclaimed :

“ The sea ! the sea ! ”

The woman shrugged her shoulders disdainfully.

“ Haven’t you ever seen anything ? ” she asked ; “ it’s the Loire.”

They went on, across the meadow now, blown upon by the free wind which drank in the scent of the vintage and mingled it with its own foam-laden perfume.

Louarn’s eyes shone, fascinated by the brightness of the flowing water.

The name of the Loire had no meaning for him ; he thought of waters rising and falling

on the strand; he thought too that Vendée at last must be on the other side of that water; and then the remembrance that he was about to leave Brittany for ever contracted his heart.

Silent and pale-faced, Louarn slackened his pace, for he was about to pass over what he called the sea and what in truth was the sea for him—the great boundary the emigrant crosses, never to return.

The woman knew nothing of what he was suffering; but Noémi chancing to approach her father, he took her hand and kept it in his.

“There’s a sail!” cried the child; “look! there’s a sail!”

But his eyes did not leave little Noémi, looking upon her so tenderly that she looked wonderingly at him, thinking: “What can be the matter with me?”

The meadow they were crossing in the wind blowing steadily from the Loire, was in the neighbourhood of Varades, but some distance from the town and the bridge.

As they neared the bank Louarn perceived a man making ready to cross the river in his

boat, and hailing him, asked him to put them over.

The man gazed at the mean caravan; like many of the peasants of the valley, he was well-to-do and poverty seemed to him a crime.

“One must make oneself useful,” he said, “but I’m in a hurry. Call your wife—she’s dawdling.”

At the word “wife” Louarn shuddered so violently that the boatman—fed on white bread and wine—began to laugh; it took very little to amuse him.

Louarn’s companion was picking mushrooms in the meadow and putting them into her upturned skirt. In spite of calls, she came on slowly, stooping now and again to add to her store—their supper for the evening.

As she approached, the peasant, leaning on his pole as it quivered in the current, noticing the woman’s frizzy hair and impudent and slovenly look, went on :

“It’s a rotten bad business, that perpetual tramping of yours; there’s no money to be got out of it. Come on! get aboard!”

They made no answer, but climbed into

the flat-bottomed boat with the little cart and all their belongings.

Louarn sat down on the bench at the bow of the boat, Noémi beside him, and again he took her hand and held it tight, tight.

But he did not speak, nor did he look at the child; his eyes roamed over the shining water on which the boat drifted along, and then to the distant shores of the Loire on either side.

Noémi was delighted at thus gliding along; she no longer had to walk; everything was flowing away behind her instead. Towards the middle of the river she felt her father's hand holding hers even tighter, and saw the look of suffering on his face half-turned towards the flowing waters as they shone in the sunlight even to the distant horizon.

"Darling," he said very low, "doesn't this great water remind you of something?"

The child's eyes followed the direction of his half-raised hand, and she shook her head, seeing nothing.

"It reminds *me* of the sea," her father went on gently; "as if it might be Yffiniac and the strand of Guettes. Don't you remember that?"

This time the little voice answered : “ No.”

“ You don’t remember your grandfather Le Clech the fisherman, who had a boat, too ? ”

“ No.”

“ We went to see him once with you, with——”

He had been about to say “ with your Maman Donatienne,” but he paused ; he bowed his head towards the bottom of the boat and the child heard him say :

“ I am all alone in the world ! ”

He did not raise his head till they reached the opposite shore.

Then Louarn got out of the boat, with a word of thanks to the peasant who had already made the boat fast and was going off ; and standing erect upon the sand at the foot of the osier-beds, facing the river, his eyes sought but one sole object—Brittany, already in the far distance—upon which they were looking for the last time.

So absorbed was he in his contemplation of the meadows, the hill-top vineyards passed an hour ago, the network of roads running to the north-west, and of all his fancy showed

him beyond, that he let Noémi get out unaided and his companion pass him with abuse while she dragged the little cart and carried the basket.

He was left alone, his whole soul yearning towards his native country, and, despite his resolutions, going out to the places where he had suffered such anguish, and so suffering it all afresh.

His spirit was lost among farewells, whose cause, whose cruelty, whose numbers in the narrow circle which had been his life, were known to him alone.

From the willow-beds, already distant, a voice called to him: "Louarn, are you coming?"

He awoke, and she went on:

"Which way am I to go?"

And he answered:

"Straight on—always straight on." Then, turning round, he followed the poor creature who had called to him, and they went on their way, deeper and deeper into the heart of France.

CHAPTER IX

A LA PETITE DONATIENNE

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IT was eight years since she had left her husband, her children and the Closerie de Ros Grignon in the parish of Plœuc, to take service in Paris, and seven since Jean Louarn, on her account, his goods sold, his heart betrayed, had cast himself forth from Brittany and taken the road to Vendée—the road that leads everywhere, or anywhere.

In the café she now kept, and which bore her name—*à la Petite Donatienne*—a suburban café at the corner of the Rue de Levallois-Perret, a customer was waiting for the bowl of coffee she had just placed before him to cool.

He was not an habitual customer; elbows on the table, his head bent over the bowl the steam from which played upon his shaven chin and the heavy colourless moustache that concealed his lips, he sat looking before

him while he mechanically stirred the black liquid with a spoon.

The muscles of his face were relaxed; he was resting; his eyes, the light full upon them—greenish eyes lit up by a vague smile born of absence of worry and a sense of well-being—were fixed on the fog showing above the short curtains that veiled the lower panes of the shop-front.

Still he felt it the right thing to say an occasional word, in accordance with the popular prejudice inherited from older and kinder days, and also out of politeness to his chance hostess, unknown to him and not even in his line of vision.

She was sitting to the left of the room, in the cross light of the window that separated the shop from the street, and she was knitting a black stocking, as she had been accustomed to do all her life since the far-off days when as a child she had run about the shore at Yffiniac, amongst the women who day after day wait for the rising tide and the return of the vessels scattered over the expanse of ocean.

She knitted mechanically, her thoughts no

more with her work than those of her customer on the fog in the streets.

What she was actually thinking was that this customer bored her, that he was eating too slowly, that she ought to have got out before this to buy the morning's provisions; milkmen were already coming back with empty cans.

Looking at the man, she noticed that his skin was seamed as by the wind when scaffolding, and that there lay lines of whitewash in his wrinkles which fell off now and then into the coffee he kept on stirring.

Neither took much trouble to answer; yet the words they exchanged with so little care or interest led them unconsciously to one of the tragic moments of life.

"So you're going back to your own part of the country?" said Donatienne.

"Yes," said the mason, "now November's coming; it's the slack season for us. Till March one must take to bricklaying. Perhaps you know Gentioux?"

"No, I never leave Paris myself. Is it pretty country about there?"

"Not very; besides when there's nobody

looking out for you, no place is very beautiful."

She yawned and made seven or eight stitches without answering, in the hope that her customer would go. He put on his felt hat, bent his head, lifted the bowl with both hands and drank a mouthful.

"It's not beautiful," he went on, "but it's one's own country and anyhow there are always acquaintances to see again. You hear who's dead while you've been away, and who's married or born. When I get back, you see, some one's always waiting for me to be godfather."

"Indeed, you don't say so," said the hostess.

"Maries, Julies, Hortenses, Pierres, Constants, Léonards, right enough. We've got all sorts of names in la Creuse——"

He laughed and blew at his coffee.

"Just fancy! I even know one little boy called Joël!" and he laughed again.

The woman had got up suddenly. Small, light-footed, dressed in black, her knitting in her hand, she approached, her shining eyes fixed straight on his. Her bored expres-

sion had disappeared, but her cheeks, still fresh-looking, though they showed a network of tiny wrinkles beneath the eyelids, had turned crimson.

“Tell me about that,” she said.

The man tried to take the hand that held her knitting as she held it out imperiously; but she snatched it away angrily.

“No nonsense ! ”

“Don’t be angry, my dear; I didn’t mean to offend. Well, yes, I saw a boy called Joël.”

“How old ? ”

“Eight or nine.”

“With curly hair ? ”

“I don’t remember.”

“Pretty ? ”

“Of course—like all of them.”

Donatienne seized him by the arm.

“Look straight at me ! you *must* remember. I’m interested in that name, your speaking of it means a great deal to me, you see—I once knew a child of the same name. Where does yours live ? ”

“Some distance from Gentioux, where my home is—about ten or twelve miles on the

way back; I can't remember the name of the place—it's at a turning out of the high-road. We saw him as we passed by—me and a mate of mine—last March—as we were walking to catch the train. I remember a sort of little garden with a hedge round it and some poplar-trees. The little boy was playing there, and my mate pointed him out to me and said: 'He's called Joël; he's the son of a man that works in the quarries up there; he's said to come from Brittany.' ”

There was a stifled cry.

“Brittany! you're sure he said Brittany? Oh, you mustn't lie to me—you couldn't do it! I want to hear—don't deceive me!”

Her hand was trembling on his arm.

“There was a little sister there, too, wasn't there?”

“No, a tall one, and by no means ugly either—a little like you——”

“Tall, you say?”

“Well, tall enough. Pretty bright eyes, like running water.”

“It's Noémi!” said the woman dreamily as if she actually saw her; “it's Noémi! And who was with her?”

“ What other children, do you mean ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ I saw only one other brat.”

“ A girl ? ”

“ No, a boy—he wore breeches, of that I’m sure.”

Donatienne’s face changed.

“ Then it’s not them—I thought—what fancies one gets into one’s head ! ”

She let go the man’s arm. An emotion she could not master contracted her heart, which, under the double shock of surprise and deception, went out involuntarily to this stranger.

The vain hope and its forcible intrusion into her customary life had made her so miserable, that she said :

“ For a moment I thought I was going to find my own again. I’ve had three children, myself—and I don’t know where they are now—I don’t know, I don’t know ! Oh, you understand ! The youngest was called Joël ; but he was my only boy—the others were called Noémi and Lucienne. I’m too much given to worrying myself, you see ! ”

She took her knitting-needles from the

stocking and, with a pretence at laughter, drew back, while the man, as he drank, gazed at her over the rim of the bowl.

The thing troubled him; he was oppressed by the mysterious grief beside him. A mother and her children—he fancied them playing together; and then to leave them. Nothing in the world would have induced him to question her; but he thought of similar stories and his heart was full of a vague pity.

He drank his coffee slowly, while Donatienne, her eyes upon her work, with quivering eyelids, knitting at random, went back to the place where she had been sitting at first.

She felt his pity following her, and asked :

“ Are you working about here ? ”

“ No, Madame; I came here for the contractor with a message to his plaster-dealer. But I know many friends of yours who’ve talked about you to me.”

“ Never mind that; but as you’re going home for a time, do find out about that Joël; and you’ll come and tell me in the spring, won’t you ? ”

“ Of course I will, Madame; it won’t be a bit of trouble to me.”

He took five sous from his waistcoat-pocket, and threw them on the marble-topped table—once more the careless journeyman of everyday life.

“It is funny, though, isn’t it, *la Patronne*, that down in la Creuse there should be a set of ragamuffins from your part of the world—for it seems you come from Brittany, too? No offence meant or taken, is there? *Au revoir.*”

The long white smock-frock crossed the room; the man’s head and shoulders—his close-cut hair almost hidden by the white-wash-sprinkled felt hat—were framed between the door-posts, then showed for a moment to the right, in the fog of the street above the short curtains of the shop-front. At last, Donatienne, whose eyes had followed the shadowy figure, saw it disappear, swallowed up in the vastness of Paris; but she still gazed at the spot where she had lost sight of him, till the passing of a carriage in the milky light destroyed the last trace of the vision.

Then the woman knitted her brows in the imperious and discontented fashion that had

been her habit of old, when, as a child, she wanted to get her own way with her parents, and she had always got it. But life was not as obedient as her father and mother.

Donatienne went into another room beyond, a narrow kitchen; took up a basket, came back into the café and was about to go out, her hand already on the copper door-handle, when a thick voice behind her called out :

“ Have you forgotten the master of the house, by any chance ? ”

Once more the woman's expressive face took on its look of irritation; but desiring to get out and wishing to avoid an explanation, she said quickly :

“ Your coffee is on the stove; you've only got to take it.”

“ That man drank some of it, didn't he ? ”

“ I gave him mine. Come, go back to bed.”

She took hold of the door-handle.

“ Stop ! ”

A man had come out of the next room and walked towards her—a man whose pasty face

wore that expression of foolishness and anger combined, so often seen in drunkards.

“ Stop, I tell you ! ”

His red leather slippers, trodden down at heel, shuffled over the boards; he had on only a pair of dark-blue cloth trousers with yellow binding, and a nightshirt, which stuck up over his waistband, and with unbuttoned collar which displayed his thick red throat where beneath the distended skin the pulsation of the arteries was visible.

He must have been a handsome man in earlier days; but indolence had given him weight; his shaven face with its short, light-coloured eyebrows was too full; his hands, covered with yellow hairs, were too fat, and his eyelids drooped over eyes in which confused ideas struggled against sleep.

“ What more do you want to say to me ? ” asked Donatienne.

He crossed his arms.

“ I want to know what you were saying to that fellow.”

“ You’re jealous again, are you ? ”

“ Perhaps I am.”

“ Jealous of that stone-breaker ! ”

She gave a sudden nervous laugh, louder than she had meant it to be, and for a second, in the scornful face, the posture of the angry and contemptuous woman, in the turn of the head, which still kept its purity of outline, her likeness to the exceedingly pretty Bretonne of bygone days was visible.

“Yes, you were leaning over him—like this—you were listening to him—you took hold of his arm. Don’t tell me you didn’t, for I saw you from the top of the staircase.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“So I’m to give you an account of all my doings now! Not if I know it! Are we man and wife? Oh, indeed!”

“What was he saying to you?”

“That’s my affair!”

“Donatienne!”

He made as if to take up a chair to strike her with. Then Donatienne dropped the basket, ran straight at the bully, and lifting herself up against him on her little feet, faced him with uplifted head, battle and hatred in her eyes.

“All right!” she cried; “hit me! What prevents you! Kill me, if you like! Do you

think my life with you is so pleasant ! I detest it, I tell you, and you too ! Take yourself off ! What are you waiting for ? Don't imagine I am going to obey you—you—a man I keep ! ”

Her features were distorted with anger ; the weary, withered woman she would soon be could be foreseen at this moment. A tooth was missing at one side of her mouth ; the rest still shone fine and white ; and her eyes, too, shone like the crests of foam-covered waves.

Again she said : “ Yes—that I keep ! ”

The last shaft went home, but the man attempted to answer :

“ There's no work to be got—you know that quite well.”

“ No—not for cowardly wretches like you ! ” and growing more furious as he gave in, she went on : “ I tell you again I'm tired of you ; you've no hold on me, and some day I'll prove it to you ! ”

“ You're too old ! ” he sneered.

“ Not to go away from here ! ”

The man half closed his eyes and said between his teeth :

“Where would you go to?”

There was a pause, while each thought upon that weighty question: “Where would you go to?” and the great difficulty there must needs be in keeping themselves if they forsook their sinful life and cast each other off.

Donatienne felt herself slipping again into the vile subjection that was now her life; she gave up the discussion, turned away and went out.

When she found herself out-of-doors, she felt angry, but still more unhappy; with her bodily eyes she saw the Levallois houses, but the eyes of her spirit looked upon the vision of all she had to do, only to go back again to everything as usual.

She was past the age when the mind is easily diverted, and, try as she might to put aside memories or thoughts of the future, there were moments when she caught glimpses of the dreary depths of her soul. But never perhaps had they been so clear to her as this morning. The unexpected talk with the stone-mason of la Creuse; the quarrel with her lover, how they showed up her wretched-

ness and brought to mind the painful memories of the loneliness which had always been her trouble since——

Through the fog, polluted by smoke, drunk and cast forth again by sewers, beasts and human beings, and which had washed the roofs and walls before falling on the pavements, she walked with bent head, deaf to the voice of the dairy-woman asking her if she didn't want any milk, and to that of the greengrocer next door as she bade her good-morning—a young woman burdened with three children, and whose trying life sometimes made her envy the mistress of the café, who was not encumbered by a family and who passed for rich in the neighbourhood.

Donatienne walked on unconsciously, every faculty of her spirit turned inwards—as was unusual with her—and absorbed by one only thought—her children.

She had always been unhappy about them. In the early days after she had left Ros Grignon, she used to shed tears when she spoke their names to her own heart—Noémi, Lucienne, Joël, especially the last whom she had suckled at her departure and of whom

her nursling in Paris reminded her. She remembered the sweetness of the little lips, formed from her own flesh and blood, and which still drew life from her as she pressed him to her bosom.

Oh ! if only he could have been with her—Joël the child given by God ; if she could have put her arms round the others once a week even, she felt as if the children might have protected her from the temptations of pleasure, the corruption of novelty, from evil example.

Many a time, when remorse first seized her, when she had but half consented to the evil, she had cried out in secret :

“ My children, save me ! ” but they were too far away, and the child she nursed was not her own and had no such protecting power, and on all sides she was encompassed by dangers, this poor Breton woman, unarmed against so many foes.

The women-servants amongst whom she lived in her first situation in the Rue de Monceau, were not all immoral, but they were all loose in their talk and accustomed to make little of things that Donatienne

thought wrong. Those of them who were without lovers were never tired of repeating that the only reason for their good conduct was the greater facility it gave them to get married.

They had no respect for any action as such, but looked upon it merely in the light of the profit that might be got out of it. Several of them appeared to be cleverer than Donatienne and were given to expressing pert opinions on every subject.

Donatienne listened to them all the more willingly because, seeing how easily she was influenced, they would say :

“ You’re very pretty, you know, Donatienne, with your nurse’s ribbons and your Plœuc cap. Everybody turns to look at you when you go by.”

She knew it only too well.

The women told her so to curry favour, as unscrupulous servants must needs do, and because she earned high wages.

The men told her so even more insistently, and things themselves combined to ruin her.

She was so young, so feather-brained, so vain, and so eager for pleasure ! Luxury

meant happiness to her; day by day her moral sense was confused, intoxicated, lessened, by the sight of the money spent around her, by the touch of too many rich stuffs, the silks, ribbons, laces, she handled; by the shamelessly open, or secret, call of the town, never ceasing by day or night, which lays hold on the imagination after taking the eyes, the memory and the heart, grown so weak—so very weak.

In six months she had gone far on the road to ruin. She had left off writing to her husband—it was known that she was married to a clodhopper. Poor Louarn! She was the first to laugh at him, when, in the servants' hall, or when they were taking tea in the evening in the cook's room when the masters were out, she was asked :

“Is it really true, Donatienne, that you used to dig the ground and reap the harvest? That fellow must have been a heartless one! I should like to see his portrait. Have you got one? Do show it to us.”

They all talked after this fashion, the women dwelling on the number of children

she had had—three in five years—and pitying her for her past life which, but for them, she might sometimes have thought of with tenderness.

The coachmen, the footmen, the butlers, both in her employers' service and on other flats, all made love to her more or less.

They were attracted by her freshness, by her pretty costume, by her mingled fearlessness and discretion; she seemed to them to belong to a stranger race.

She came simply of good stock—imaginative, somewhat foolish and vain, and she laughed more often than others; but in fact she was more upright, because her past had been a better one, and she allowed fewer liberties.

Then, too, she was treated in a different way, living on her mistress's floor, spoilt with presents as nurse, and this, too, placed her apart and exposed her to complimentary attentions.

It was at this time that her nursling died almost suddenly of some obscure malady. Donatienne wept for him, and she was frightened as well as grieved, for this must needs

alter her life. She felt very weary, and the flow of her milk had almost stopped.

Some days went by; she was still sleeping on her mistress's floor, out of consideration for herself and until the flow of milk had ceased.

One evening Madame sent for her. She was very kind; despite the pangs of her own maternal heart, she found pitying words for the other woman who had suckled the dead child and with whom she had so to speak shared her motherhood.

A fair-haired, pale-faced woman, dressed in deep mourning.

"Nurse," she said in conclusion; "nurse, you'll stay on with us, won't you? It will be a sort of way of paying my debt to you—you looked after him so well! Besides, after the misfortune that has happened to us, who knows what your Bretons at home might say? And then, my poor girl, you can't wish to endure such poverty afresh? If you will stay on as my second housemaid, I will keep you. Only I can't let you live on this floor then."

The young woman was sincerely convinced

that she was performing a charitable action and doing the right thing. Lapped in luxury, she pitied poverty as the worst of all evils; she had need have been a saint to do otherwise. Moreover she was well-nigh ignorant of what became of her servants up above after ten o'clock at night; like other people, she had no means of knowing; and it was quite true that in the fine flat in the Rue de Monceau, there was no room for the servants to be put up near their employers. Custom was to blame, or the architect, or the owner, or the neighbours, who did just the same; or the price of land, or the incomes which could not run to a whole house; or to the distance created by ignorance, distrust and hatred—the insecurity and fragility of the relations between servants and masters; or the fatal belief that each individual is responsible only for himself alone; or the youthfulness of this woman of twenty-five who had never had time to think upon these matters and to whom her mother had never spoken of them;—and Donatienne was lost.

She knew that soiled corridor on the sixth floor—the attics with their divisions pierced

with holes you stuffed with paper; the laughter, the dubious talk, the importunities, the knockings on the door at night when the men returned from the theatre or the café; the cabals, the taking of sides that followed, the jealousies; the doors that opened at an arranged signal; the summons of the electric bells which made ten men swear and one woman go downstairs; and the entertainments under the roof which began like those lower down—save for the *mise-en-scène*—and ended in debauchery.

Escape was more difficult for Donatienne than for others.

She became the mistress of a footman, a very good-looking man, celebrated for his successes with women; his livery hiding his impudence, and his tongue criticizing the people he served with the assurance and wealth of knowledge of a man of twenty-eight who could already count fifteen years of service in all sorts of circles in Paris.

He was very proud of his conquest. It was about this time that Donatienne was receiving those imploring letters—which she did not answer; the letters in which Louarn

told her of the approaching sale of their furniture at home. She did not believe it; her lover said to her: "It's to get you back again, or else to blackmail you;" and she sent no money nor did she start to save the Closerie de Ros Grignon. The last two letters were not even given to her, so that she might be told: "You see they've forgotten you, and what humbug it was about your household goods in Brittany! They don't even write now!"

Oddly enough, about the same time she asked permission to leave off wearing her Breton cap; now that she was no longer nurse, less seen out-of-doors, and not forming a part of the outside luxury of the house, it mattered little.

So she took off the two bands of muslin, rolled, goffered, put on after the fashion of the parish of Plœuc; folded them up, three caps in all, and packing them away with the many-pleated thick woollen gown, wore them no more.

She wore hats now, she waved her hair and coiled it high on her head, and became one of the crowd. It completely changed Dona-

tienne; it would have needed a very keen observer to recognize aught of Brittany in this little bright-eyed, wide-awake, shrewd maidservant—with her nervous laugh and sad smile.

The summer went by; Ros Grignon was forsaken and she knew nothing of it.

She thought often of her children and would fain have had news of them; and at moments also remorse took hold of her. In her early youth she had been pious; a remnant of religion still remained in her heart, and she knew hers was an evil life; but such thoughts came but seldom and lasted but a little while.

Far away, in the land of poverty, for protection or retrieval, she would have had the Feasts of the Church with the devout practices they brought—High Mass and the sermons of the Curé of Plœuc, missions, baptisms, the tolling of the death-bell; thrice a day the ringing of the Angelus summoning all to prayer. She would have had the example of the aged women of the parish, who paid occasional visits to the farm—a little sententious and twaddling, perhaps,

but leaving behind them the wish to lead a good life.

She had nothing of the sort in Paris—a Low Mass, perhaps, if Madame thought of it, at the hour the mistress herself permitted and arranged.

September came, and she was in a country-house outside Paris, her way of life unaltered.

But she was so tortured by anxiety at receiving no further news that she disobeyed her lover's orders.

She wrote to "Mademoiselle Noémi Louarn, Closerie de Ros Grignon, en Plœuc, Bretagne," and asked how every one was.

A week passed bringing no news, and she thought Louarn must have learnt what she had become, and accused her husband of preventing Noémi answering.

To find out, she wrote to the girl she herself had chosen to do the work of the house and look after the children.

She asked Annette Domerc: "Why don't they write?"

This time there was no delay in the coming of the brutal answer:

"So you don't know that everything is

sold ? You haven't got any home now, and your man has gone away. He started for Vendée and took the children with him."

"Gone away ! Taken !" Where were they ? Nobody knew, neither the Mayor, nor the Curé, nor the Abbé Hourtier, who had received no letter from Louarn.

Then despair seized Donatienne—a passionate and violent anguish.

She broke with her lover, accusing him, truly, though she did not know it, of having kept back Louarn's last letters ; she refused food ; she wept for a whole week, incessantly repeating : " Noémi, Lucienne, Joël ! "

Allowances were made for her, because she was so quick and clever a servant, and because she had been the dead child's nurse ; but it was not long before her health gave way, and one November afternoon she was hurried off to the hospital, the doctor having pronounced it to be enteric fever.

Three days later, her mistress sent to inquire after her, and speaking to some guests before going in to dinner, said :

" You remember that little maid I had—the Bretonne ? Well, she's very bad—

temperature much above a hundred the day after she left us. She was very nice, wasn't she? And so good—such a good mother; indeed I think it's her love for her children that's killing her. A drunken husband probably, who has taken them off and leaves her without news. Sad, isn't it?"

And Donatienne came very near dying in fact, and her recovery was very slow.

When she left the hospital, she was still so weak that she could not dream of taking another situation at once; so poor that she had but just enough to live upon for a few weeks; and so changed in appearance that she was ashamed to go back to the Rue de Monceau, where, though her place as second housemaid was no longer to be had, she would assuredly have been helped in some way or other, a good character given her, and been sent to some friend in want of a really decent girl.

She shrank from meeting in that house the man she now detested and letting him and the others see her with her hair grown thin upon her temples, and her hollow cheeks, and her eyes which had become somewhat unequal

and which she found difficult to fix steadily on anything without squinting.

She took a furnished room, not knowing what she could do when she had to quit it, as is the fate of so many servants after dismissal or discharge from a hospital.

She had thought of returning to Brittany; but what means of livelihood could she find in the neighbourhood of Plœuc? How could she earn anything in that poverty-stricken place, where, moreover, every one must be thinking ill of her since Louarn went? They'd make her suffer for it—yes, suffer cruelly; and she was suffering so much already, and the melancholy inherent in the nature of the natives of the Breton coasts had become so definite an anguish!

An attempt she made towards reconciliation with her parents, the fishers of Yffiniac, failed, when she was obliged to confess that she could bring home neither any savings nor any chance of employment; and poverty was coming very near her.

Before she had quite regained her strength, Donatienne risked her last twenty francs at a registry-office and obtained a fresh situation

with a society-woman who had two daughters to marry. She had to leave because she had to sit up every night, and it was the furnished lodgings again, then utter despair, and then once more the life of sin.

She had no thought now of attracting or dazzling any man; her dread was that she might die of hunger.

And so, unseduced by desire, yielding more easily than that first time, shutting her eyes, ashamed but resolved as though she were leaping into the river, she “took up” with another man—to use the vulgar expression—an ex-coachman, well-to-do, a brute and a drunkard, who had left service and wanted to buy a business.

Needless to say, he bought a café, and expected Donatienne to make it pay.

For six years they had lived together, looked upon in their Levallois quarter as husband and wife. She looked after the house and kitchen, served the customers, except during the hour every morning when she went out to buy provisions; she kept the accounts; she mended the linen in her spare moments.

The café was a success, thanks to Dona-

tienne's energy and spirit of order, the kind of authority over her surroundings that came naturally to her, and to her habit—a habit which charmed her suburban customers—of always speaking politely.

Bastien Laray, the man with whom she lived, was of little or no use; he spent the whole day out-of-doors on the pretext of seeing to the replenishment of the cellar or renewing the advertisements, or even of looking for a situation as chauffeur—which he would have been much disgusted to find. He could do better than that; he had his pension; he came home drunk three days out of four.

Donatienne led him because she was cleverer than he, but, before yielding, he beat her because he was the stronger.

They had no love for one another, and there was no deception between them on that point; but they did not know how to earn a living if they should separate.

All the care, the trouble, all the patience for which beloved wives and mothers are repaid by the loving gratitude and tenderness of husbands or children, Donatienne gave without hope of affectionate thanks, without

a hope for the future, without the inward peace she had never been able to attain.

She had endeavoured to gain that peace, or at least a blank silence of soul; she had struggled to drive away all thoughts of religion, and to fight against those reproaches of the conscience which, like the shoots of a root cut level with the light, grow feebler and feebler at each new birth.

In her daily life, always full of work and amusement, she found a way to put aside the importunate vision of the past; it was only at moments that irresistible yearnings of mother love seized and crushed her, leaving her powerless to shake off the memory of all the rest—the things and the people she had believed forgotten.

At such moments, to divert her thoughts, she would gossip with the customers, or play cards with them, or even trust a neighbour to look after the café, and go out, by herself or with her lover, into the streets of Paris and join the crowds there.

One of the arguments that served her purpose at such times to fight against the upheaval in the depths of her being, was the

utter impossibility of her taking up again any of the duties she had relinquished—the impossibility even of finding out if her husband and children were still alive.

Might they not have succumbed, father or children—perhaps all—under the wretchedness of the tramp's life, poverty even worse than the first! Seven years without news—seven years!

And now, all of a sudden, she was told that a Joël—a child of about the same age as hers, and who came from Brittany—had been seen in la Creuse, and she could not discover if it were her child or not.

But it was enough to break her truce with herself; and the thought of those she had forsaken, hitherto kept in abeyance, once more took possession of her mind, inspired by the name of Joël. The doubts, the disquiet, the accusations to which Donatienne could find no reply—all came back to her.

“I'm tormenting myself for nothing,” she thought as she walked on quickly through the fog, “just for nothing at all! Is it likely that my child was the only one in Brittany of that name? And since the mason saw

two boys and one girl in the little field with poplars round it, it can't be the same. No, they can't be my children. Besides, their father—if he's like what he used to be when I knew him—would have died of the sorrow I caused him—my man must have died——”

The tradespeople whose shops she passed, thought she looked as if she were dreaming, and she did not stop to talk to them.

“Madame Donatienne has got something on her mind,” said the baker's wife, the green-grocer and the wife of the confectioner—a real lady, with a daughter Donatienne always looked at for the sake of her soft eyes full of compassion for an unknown life.

But who could guess at the cause of her trouble? No one did guess.

When would that stone-mason come back? Not for four months. Some of the details he had given her seemed strangely near the truth, if others seemed doubtful.

Donatienne stayed out-of-doors longer than usual; when she got back, the café was half full, and Bastien Laray was sitting in the sort of glazed pulpit, where she herself sat in the afternoon.

He gave her an amiable smile—a rare event—and calling her in a low voice with the wink which made the people about say : “ That’s a happy household ! ” he asked :

“ You didn’t think you’d been out only a short time, did you ? Plenty of customers have come in, and I’ve served them for you. Are you the better for your walk ? No ! Are you angry with me still ? Shall we go to the theatre to-night ? ”

The sound of a *sou* struck upon marble interrupted his apology, and Bastien Laray, as if that meant an order, said out loud : “ Give us your three sous,” and got down to take the price of a glass of beer.

The woman mounted the two steps to the raised seat, the customers who knew her gazing at her, the others, too, casting a look at her.

The day dragged on, ending in fog ; outside the horses slipped as if on snow ; the smoke, beaten down by the wind, thinned but still seen to be smoke, dipped in eddies as low as the windows, and it was at that that Donatienne gazed when she lifted her head from the ledger.

And she kept saying to herself: "That was what I ought to have said to that la Creuse mason when he was here this morning. I ought to have asked him a lot more questions; and now I don't know where to find him." And her heart was torn with anguish.

Why hadn't she insisted on being told the name of the village where that Joël lived, or some other village near? She could have written to the children; but the shock, the emotion, the swift disillusionment, had prevented her doing the right thing.

But no;—could she have written to the children? What could she have said—what excuse could she have made for forsaking them? And if they were still alive, if those were really Noémi and Joël, wouldn't they be tempted, or perhaps ordered, to answer her harshly as an unworthy mother?

Oh, no! no letters. Depend upon it, that would happen. But she must wait—many months, and even then, after all the anguish of suspense, what might she hear? Very likely nothing at all. Perhaps that man was an impostor, a humbug sent by somebody who knew she had been married and wanted

to make her own to the sinfulness of her present life. Still, he had looked simple enough—he had not once laughed; he seemed to be an honest fellow, too, save for the audacity all men show to women like her, still pretty and moderately young. Unspeakably weary at last, she said to herself: “I should like it to be true, even if I should be deprived of them for ever. I should like to know that they are alive, and beautiful, and where they are——”

CHAPTER X
THE THEATRE

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THE THEATRE

THAT evening, after dinner in the back-shop, she dressed herself, and, despite the weariness of her expression, she looked well in her hat with its pink and black feathers, and the grey fur round her neck; she walked well, and her small work-worn and discoloured hands were hidden by her gloves.

The man hurried her along, and the women living near, who, like their sisters in the country, lost nothing that happened in the street, said to one another: "There they go again—to the theatre, I bet. They must earn a lot; but it's her that makes him spend his money that way; she cares for nothing but amusement."

With an imitation diamond pin in his necktie, his chest bulging out his coat, and his air of insolent conquest, Bastien Laray walked beside Donatienne.

He was trying to do away with the disastrous effect of the morning's brutality; for he had clearly recognized that what Donatienne had said in a moment of anger was true—she could leave him without need for any excuse.

They took the train and quickly found themselves on the Boulevards; it was nearly nine o'clock.

When they entered the brightly-lighted theatre the play had already begun. People were laughing as they listened, every face expressing the same sentiment as all the others. Several people had to get up to allow Donatienne and her lover to get to their seats near the middle of the front row of the gallery.

As for him he was already absorbed in the performance, and she longed to feel the same so that she might escape the obsession of the thoughts that had held her since the morning.

She loved the theatre, and had spent a great part of her wages when she was in service to "get a good laugh," as she called it, and the self-possessed manner in which she passed on first, with lifted head and

whispers of "Pardon"; the gesture with which she drew her skirt aside as she took her seat, and, before looking at the actors, gazed through her opera-glass at the audience, testified to a long-established habit of frequenting such entertainments.

Presently she rested her elbows on the red velvet of the balustrade and tried to give her mind to the distant stage, whence rose speeches that should have made her laugh; but she felt as if she heard nothing but a confusion of senseless words, vague sounds which made no impression on her, while others words, unspoken, and unknown of all but herself, seemed, with the sound of waves, to break upon her inward hearing: "Noémi! Lucienne! Joël!"

She could no more refuse to listen to them—those words in which was told the whole drama of her life—than she could have stopped the flow of a spring of water with her hand.

The play could not deliver her from herself; she looked at the orchestra, the boxes, the women's dresses; but the anguish of her heart knew no alleviation; on the contrary, it did

but increase by contrast with the scene and the crowd around her.

Feeling that she could bear it no longer, she leant towards her lover, intending to say, "Take me out!" when before opening her lips, in a seat on the other side of Bastien Laray, she caught sight of a woman, like herself of the lower classes, a fresh-cheeked young woman, who had brought her child, a baby of two years old or so, and was cuddling him against her—her breast to his.

The little fair sleeping head lay upon his mother's shoulder, and his little body rose and fell with his regular breathings, and at times, as if in a dream, heaved and then subsided.

The woman was sitting close to the balustrade, and was apparently entirely absorbed in the play itself, and Donatienne thought: "Suppose she were to let go of the child! Suppose she even loosed her arm from him, he might fall over and be killed. How pretty he is, the innocent little creature!"

And she gazed at him so long that at last the mother noticed it, and they exchanged a look of understanding, each recognizing the motherhood of the other.

Donatienne gave only a sad smile; but presently she began to think that if she might take the child on her knee it would be a solace to her heart; but she dared not say so.

The other woman, once more engrossed in the play, kept her eyes fixed upon the stage; but Donatienne remained still half-turned towards the child, feeling herself grow pale as if her very life were being drained away.

The theatre, the play, the laughter—how far away it all was! The man beside her listening to the farce, ignorant of what was going on so near him, seemed an utter stranger to her; and how utter a stranger he really was!

What she was really looking at were the last pictures left her by the old household life, pictures she had been thrusting away for many years, but to-night bitterly triumphant and ravaging her soul.

She saw the house at Ros Grignon on its stony hillock, the field of buckwheat and the field of rye forming two lighter strips at the foot of the hill, and, beyond them, the waste land and the Forest with the wind singing

through it; she saw the room with the bed and the cradles, and the door opening into the stable; and she saw the three children pressing round her when she came in from the fields.

“ Oh, my darlings ! where are you ? Is it true you are still alive ? ”

Everything had been sold ; yes, and others now tilled the poor fields where Louarn had laboured. It was all done with, and Donatienne felt no wish to go back to that old life ; but as she sat high up in this theatre—fool that she was—more strongly than ever it came to her that by separating herself from her children she had relinquished an immense, a durable, happiness, which of old she had been too young and too frivolous to understand. Now-a-days she could not have resisted the little hands, the arms, the eyes, the lips, of the three beloved creatures she had once known around her.

“ Oh, children ! children ! How can mothers ever leave you, except by death ? What madness made me take service in Paris ? What madness made me stay there, when I was free to go back ? I want the

loving touch of your hands, and the weight of your bodies on my knees. Oh, how wretched I am ! ”

And indeed so evident was it that she was suffering, that Bastien Laray turned round, his heavy face beaming with enjoyment, and said :

“ You’re not laughing, Donatienne ? ”

“ No.”

“ You’re not taking it in ? ”

“ No.”

“ I didn’t pay for your seat for you to give yourself such airs. What more do you want ? ”

The woman next him, hearing the taunt, looked at Donatienne, while she rocked the child slowly and fondly on her soft young bosom. Then she saw the gloved hands put half-out towards her, timidly, doubtfully, and heard a voice say :

“ Madame, would you let me hold him ? ”

“ Would you like to ? ”

“ It would do me good ; I’ve none left myself, now.”

She looked so pale that the woman knew she was speaking the truth, and pitied her.

“What a fool you are, Donatienne !” said her lover.

But the woman had gently lifted the child, and behind the back of the protesting man, to the delight of the women around and the disgust of the men, saying : “Keep quiet, you women there !” she held it out to Donatienne, not without a shade of alarm, nevertheless. And, when she had given up the blue and white frock, in her turn she was not quite equal to looking at or listening to the play, and she felt a little sorry.

She kept on smiling politely, but her eyes wandered often towards Donatienne, who had laid the baby on her knees, and, her arms around him in motherly fashion, was sitting motionless, bent over him like a cradle and watching him as he slept.

A shuddering she could not still seized her ; but it came not of pleasure, as she had hoped for, but of grief and remorse even deeper.

The play was ending ; the curtain fell.

“Enough of that nonsense !” said the man ;
“give up that brat, and let’s go.”

She made no answer, but lifted the warm little body to her lips, hesitated a moment as

if she were ashamed and felt herself unworthy, then quickly kissed the pink cheek, which puckered under the kiss. "Thank you," she said, as she gave the child back to its mother; and she went out with Bastien Laray.

It was one o'clock when they got back to the little flat over the café. The man, tired and cross, went to bed in almost complete silence. Donatienne undressed slowly, dawdling about the room so as to lengthen the time; she longed to-night to stretch herself on the floor or in an armchair.

When she saw that Bastien was asleep, she sought her bed; and in the night she wept.

* * * * *

A bitter grief had come into Donatienne's life; but no great change followed it, and it even lessened, like the rest, as the weeks went by. No one knew her secret, and she strove to fight against the fancies that assailed her, and to assure herself that there would be no return of that messenger who had upset her so terribly.

The winter passed, and March began to

scatter the wintry clouds. Every morning, as she took down the shutters of the shop-front, Donatienne looked out for the man who had promised to return.

He was never there, and in spite of herself, she felt deceived. As she lighted the fire and put the coffee on to boil, her thoughts turned invincibly to those she had forsaken; and what filled her with the most piercing sadness was that she could form no picture of them as they must now be—those children she herself had borne. They never looked at her; they never smiled; they were voiceless. What would they have called her? How tall were they? What clothes did they wear?

So she tortured herself till the first customers appeared to save her from the anguish of her soul.

And the days of March dragged on.

CHAPTER XI
THE PASSER-BY

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THE PASSER-BY

FAR away from Paris, and still farther from Brittany, there was a plain, broken by hills and vales. On its northern side a high plateau went down almost perpendicularly into the valley and closed it. To the east and west, lower hills rose up, hemming in the enclosed plain, green in springtime and the colour of dry withies when summer had gone.

Its vast extent could be seen by the slow passage of the clouds the wind blew over it, when it was not blowing a gale it took them half a day to disappear. The herdsmen, accustomed to watch them, had the eyes of dreamers; they drove their flocks of sheep or pigs across the moorland of the plateau, where shallow ponds shimmered amongst the heather and rye.

In the plain the villages were distant from each other; when it was fine you caught

sight of them from afar; not because of their spires, for all the churches had little square towers; but because of their red-tiled roofs.

The very centre of France, a region so far, far inland, no sea-breeze, no mountain-air could reach it with unbroken wings; a region where the summer heat burned up the still milky wheat and often dried up the fruit while still green.

Not far from the entrance of this plain, the road, which had sloped, rose, and then again sloped downwards, and, at the bottom of the second slope ran past a poor-looking house—two rooms under a roof of ancient tiles, cracked and loose and covered with a thick mat of dust and dead leaves, varying in appearance with the seasons.

Inside the enclosure there were some cabbage and carrot beds, a pond, a little farther on a well, and some narrow borders sown with stocks.

All round this diminutive domain, shaped corner-wise, writhed a thick quickset hedge, clasping the trunks of some poplars cut down to within eight yards or so of the ground to be used as firewood, and that was all. Out

beyond, the land was broadly striped by meadows and fields of wheat and clover.

There was no other building near; but a road of moderate width, branching off at the angle of the hedge, led to the village you could make out amidst the trees of the orchards, half a mile or so away.

On the twentieth of March the day was cold; the wind blew off the purple plateau, carrying with it over the plain a heavy canopy of cloud seemingly endless. For more than a week the clouds had drifted southwards with only an occasional break whence fell a shower of rays lighting up a corner of the landscape and bringing out its smallest details—a flock of sheep, a moving carriage, the forms of the banks and ditches, the gilt cock on a church or a weathercock.

By the tender green of the meadows and the clumps of trees, it could be seen then that the spring had begun and that there were buds upon the branches. Neither the wind nor the sky would have proclaimed it; and, in the humble garden at the road-side, the whistling wind flapped about the linen a young girl was hanging out.

She had been washing it in the pond at

the end of the garden farthest from the road; the floating soap-suds were spreading all over the surface of the water; and now, having put it into a wheelbarrow, she was taking it out, piece by piece—shirts, handkerchiefs, children's drawers, and dishcloths—spreading it out, and fastening it with wooden pegs upon a line stretched in front of the house along the rows of cabbages as far as the high-road.

The inflated shirts beat the air with their sleeves; the squares of linen crumpled themselves up, and twisted about, flapping noisily.

The girl went on with her work, which she had begun at the end of the line nearest the house, with grave attention.

She was not tall, but slender and well made, and unmistakably more refined than the ordinary peasant-woman.

At this particular moment, some one was considering her attentively, though she did not see him—a man dressed like a workman in an ill-fitting suit of dark, coarse, striped cloth, with a shabby bowler hat on his head, and carrying at the end of a stick over his shoulder a voluminous bundle tied up in a white smock.

He had come up from the end of the plain

and his big shoes of unpolished leather were covered with mud.

He had been walking against the wind and its sharp sting had reddened his face and made his eyes water.

A little way from the garden he had caught sight of the girl, and, slackening his pace, he approached slowly, with frequent pauses as if to recover his breath; like a very weary man. In fact he was somewhat weary; but what he wanted especially was to take note of this house, this garden, and the people he might find there; and he was anxious that the young linen-hanger should not see him too soon.

But she was absorbed in her work; going backwards and forwards, stooping and rising, which prevented the passer-by from seeing her face, now turned away, now concealed behind a piece of linen or by her arms as they held it up.

She wore a short skirt which displayed a pair of sabots, and on her slim legs stockings that ought to have been red but which were of a sort of faded pink and much darned.

Her skirt and bodice were black, and over them she wore a blue cotton apron that she

had put on to do her washing and had not taken off, though it was very wet and crumpled into a heap.

When the man was within fifteen paces of her, he stopped at the corner of the hedge that enclosed the garden, and his placid face showed signs of strong feeling, which pulled at the corners of his heavy, cracked lips.

He recognized the girl he had seen, then seated and a little way off, a year earlier, as she approached the hedge—and consequently the road. Her features were as delicate as her body, with dark eyes under long lashes, a very small mouth like Donatienne's; a pale complexion, a pointed chin, and an expression both sad and shy.

The wind blew her skirt about, and some locks of her hair, but the mass of this—of the colour of roasted chestnuts—was done up in a small coil at the top of her head.

She would have looked a town-girl, but for her poverty-stricken garments. Nothing else was stirring in the small enclosure;—yes, a little boy of five or six, over there in the doorway of the house.

The mason remembered his promise to

speak to these people on his way back and to bring news of them. He was on his way to catch the train to Paris, above on the plateau.

He was only a few yards away from the girl, who was now hanging up a big checked-cotton shirt which the cold breeze instantly caught and inflated.

The man coughed to attract her attention, and the girl shivered and started backwards, still holding one of the wooden clothes-pegs which she had been about to fix on the line, and looking over the hedge, discovered the wayfarer who had laid down his bundle of clothes at the edge of the ditch and was wiping his face with the back of his sleeve.

He did not look a bad man and she was on her own side of the hedge, so she stayed where she was.

“ Would it be possible to give me a glass of wine here, my dear ! ” he said, in as gentle a voice as he could manage.

That seemed a happy idea ; but she answered :

“ We’ve got nothing but water.”

“ Well, a glass of water. I’m thirsty.”

Before answering, she looked again to

convince herself that he was not a dangerous tramp, and then glanced towards the village.

“ I’ll get you one.”

In a moment she had run to the house, drawn the water and come back again, holding the full glass at arm’s length, the shaken water sending up sparkles of blue.

“ It’s good fresh water,” she said, “ you just see.”

He raised his hat, drank off the water at a draught, shook the drops from the glass and handed it back over the hedge.

“ Thank you, Mademoiselle Noémi,” he said.

She took the glass, and then stood motionless in an astonishment that grew greater and greater, and the serious expression of her young face turned to one of anxiety if not hostility.

“ I am not called Mademoiselle, but my name is Noémi. How did you know it ? ”

“ I saw you last year when I went by on my way to Paris for my time there. Don’t you remember ? ”

“ No.”

“ One of my mates pointed out the house to me; he said the people that live there

don't belong to this part of the country—they come from a long way off—and that there was a boy called Joël. Is that true ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Is that him down there ? ”

“ No, that's Baptiste; Joël is with father at the quarry.”

“ How many are there of you ? ”

“ Four.”

“ So much the worse.”

“ What can it matter to you ? ” she asked, reassured, she knew not why, and she gave a youthful laugh.

“ I'm out of my reckoning,” the man said as if to himself as he shook his head; “ so much the worse.”

“ Well,” said the girl, setting to work again, “ you'd better be getting on now; I've got all my washing to hang out, and if I'm caught idling I shall catch it.”

A sense of personal disappointment had come over the mason when she had given four as the number of the children.

So this was what he would have to report to *la Patronne*—the eager, pretty, motherly mistress of the café at Levallois !

In his mind's eye he saw her crying and

saying: "Why did you come? Before I saw you I had no hope, and now you've taken it away from me again!"

His was a simple heart, easily touched. Again he gazed at the girl, who was still looking rather suspiciously at him as she spread the rest of the linen over the cabbages, there being no more space on the line; and the resemblance between her face and that other as he recalled it was so strong, that he let the stick and the bundle he had stooped to pick up lie where they were.

"You mustn't be angry, little Noémi, and suppose I'm one of those tramps that talk over hedges to everybody they see, and haven't much good to tell about their lives. I'm a native of this part of the country—I come from Gentioux, and every one there knows I come of decent people. If I spoke to you—come back here, and let me tell you about it."

She came a little nearer, still holding a square of linen in her hands.

"It was because I saw in Paris some one who I feel sure is a relation of yours——"

"I didn't know I had any," said Noémi; "is it a man?"

"No."

She had raised herself on her sabots to get a better view of the traveller; her lips were parted and her nostrils white with emotion.

The man said to himself: "She knows something!" and he saw that the cloth had dropped from her hands.

From the other side of the hedge, close to him, the girl said in a voice of impassioned entreaty:

"Is she alive, then?"

"Come," said the man, who saw that the girl was in the grip of either grief or joy; "come, before I tell you about it, there are several things I must know. Don't go on like that—your hands needn't tremble;—you said four children, didn't you?"

"Yes; there's Baptiste, the youngest, and then going up, Joël, Lucienne, and me. That makes four."

"One more than I was told of. You came from Brittany?"

"Yes; I was more than five years old. I can remember it. I walked, the others rode in the hand-cart."

"Your mother lives here with you?"

The girl knitted her brow, hesitating to reveal what she kept hidden in the depths

of her own heart. Once more she looked to assure herself that the traveller's face showed real feeling, that before her stood a really good man; then she bent forward, and speaking fast—woman and child in one—she said :

“ There is Baptiste's mother, Monsieur ; but she's not *my* mother. It seems mine allowed our place in Brittany to be sold and would not come back. She went away to nurse the child of some rich people, and she's never been seen again.”

“ What was her name ? ”

“ Donatienne.”

“ Then *I've* seen her ! ” said the man.

“ Oh ! what are you saying ? You've seen her ? ”

“ Yes, and I've even spoken to her.”

She began to cry silently, with lifted eyes, from which the tears fell as she looked over the man's head towards the tree-tops as if there she beheld the vision of her who had been called Donatienne. Then her eyelids fell and she fell a-sobbing, still smiling at that same vision.

“ Tell me if she spoke of me, Monsieur ? ”

“ Of you all.”

“Then she hasn’t forgotten us as they say? I knew she hadn’t—I felt sure of it—I loved her so. Is she old?”

“Not at all—a beautiful woman still,” and he thought to himself: “as you will be; she’s young again in you.”

But all he said was:

“What do you want to know? When I told her that there was a Joël in this part of the world, she wanted to hear all about it. I told her everything I knew and then she cried out: ‘I am their mother!’ Perhaps it wouldn’t take much—if she got leave—to make her give up everything in Paris and come back——”

“Oh, no—no!” cried the girl in alarm; “don’t let her come? Only give her my love. Tell her I’ve seen her in my dreams; tell her I say her name in my prayers;—the others are too young, aren’t they? But don’t let her come back! I should love her to come, but the others don’t want her!”

“Who?”

And she answered with all Donatienne’s own tragic ardour:

“My father, and the other. When they talk about her they want her to die, or they

say they feel sure she's dead, and they both go on saying all sorts of dreadful things about her; and because I won't call the other 'Maman' they have rows with me and she would like to beat me if she could. Oh! they're not always kind to me, you can tell Maman Donatienne. Oh, Monsieur! now I shall think of nothing but her—but I won't say that I know she is alive—no, I promise you I won't. Tell me where she lives."

He wrote the address in a limp, worn notebook fastened with an elastic band, tore out the page and gave it to the girl.

Noémi glanced again in the direction of the village, and said:

"She's coming back—Baptiste's mother! There she is. You can't see her, but I know the road and I know it's her. She went with Lucienne to buy coals in the town. Don't stay; when she sets father on, he can be rough. He'll be coming back from the quarry soon, too. Go on, or I may get a beating—and you, too, perhaps."

"Oh, me!" said the man; "no fear!"

He pointed to the stick on the ground, stooped, slung the bundle of clothes on to his back, and raising his hat, said:

“Then I may say I saw Noémi, mayn’t I?”

The poor child was so moved that the fast-coming tears choked her and she could only make a gesture of assent. Then she pointed out the road to the town, and feeling herself to blame, stooped to finish spreading out the washing.

The mason walked on, and now she turned round to watch him mount the hill on whose summit were the limestone rocks and the quarry where Louarn worked. Her whole young heart was following the messenger who had brought to her so great a secret—the man who had seen her real mother.

Having finished her work she forgot to take the wheelbarrow back to the shed.

Higher and higher went the man, a moving figure against the white dust. The wind grew chill; the sun was setting; the vast plain, already melancholy enough under its canopy of flying clouds, darkened and lost its distant outline.

“What are you doing there, lazybones? What are you staring at?”

Noémi shivered and hastened to take up the wheelbarrow and go towards the house. The voice went on:

“ You’ll catch it from your father ! He’ll give you a good hiding ! Here I’ve been gone two hours and the washing isn’t dry yet—in such a wind as this, too ! ”

The girl was already under cover of the shed and out of hearing of the voice, helped by the noise of the wind rattling the tiles and whistling through the branches of the poplars round the house.

But there was no escape for Noémi. A woman appeared upon the high-road, and passing the turning, opened the wicket gate that divided the quickset hedge in the middle.

The woman, who had with her a thin, awkward-looking girl of eleven, was a solidly-built termagant, with broad shoulders, whose piercing yellow eyes seemed perpetually on the look-out for a quarrel. Her arms ended in a pair of enormous hands that could have fought a strong man.

This was the woman with whom Louarn lived—called “ la Louarn ” in the district ; the woman he had met by chance during the first weeks of his exile, and who had made her appearance one evening when the poor wanderer was attempting to light a fire by

the road-side to cook food for his crying children.

Noémi could remember it; she was the only inconvenient witness to the past—the only one who could say: “I once had another mother, in Brittany.”

“You lazy hussy!” the woman went on, as Noémi came into the front room of the house. “I suppose you’ve not begun to make the soup yet! The saucepan isn’t even on the fire, and the potatoes aren’t peeled. What have you been doing?”

“I hung out the linen, first,” said Noémi.

“First!—First your father’ll be back, and I’ll tell him what a good-for-nothing creature you are!”

Behind her, Lucienne was carrying coals in a sack as well as some starched caps in a basket. She was followed by Baptiste who was peeling a willow-twigg with a bit of glass.

“Here’s the coal, Maman,” she said; “make Noémi work now; I’ve had my turn.”

La Louarn pointed to the shed where the store of potatoes was kept, calling out:

“Go on, you lazy thing! Make the soup!”

The words hurt Noémi more than usual;

in her inmost heart she felt so sure that her real mother would never have spoken or acted like this woman.

Instead of obeying, she took off her apron, and said : “ You can make it yourself. I’m going to dry myself ; I’m wet through, and I’ve been working harder than you.”

The woman turned purple.

“ You won’t do what I tell you, you little beast ? Won’t you, indeed ? You dare to bandy words with me ? ”

She stooped, seized her sabot by its leather strap, and hurled it at Noémi. The wooden sole just brushed the girl in passing, then struck the wall at the end of the room and fell upon the floor.

“ That’ll teach you ! ” screamed the woman as she threw it.

The words were still ringing in the room, mingled with Baptiste’s frightened cries, when a tall, gaunt figure almost entirely filled the doorway.

“ What’s the matter, now ? ” asked a deep, dull-toned voice.

It was Louarn.

Grief, the wear and tear of work and weather, mistrust of himself and his kind, had

carved out of the wooden body of the transplanted Breton this statue of Poverty.

Naturally long of face, his jaw had lengthened and drooped, leaving his cracked lips apart, like the mouths of dried herrings, distorted by death and fire. The lips never lost now their lamentable curve, and the lower part of the face had kept the look and motions of such as appeal for help.

No beard; flat cheeks; the skin of the nose tight-stretched; deep, shadowy hollows beneath the eyebrows—hollows dug out by weariness and tears—and in their depths, eyes scarcely to be seen and looking dark because of the deep shadow, but which, in the full light when by chance they were clearly seen, made the only spot of light in the sombre visage—eyes of the colour of the blue-grey sea, the colour of the sea when it runs lazily and foam-streaked into the fishing-port harbours.

Jean Louarn wore his hair rather long, cut even with the collar of his jacket, and, like his skin, it was faded and reddened by the open air. He walked with bent back and sunken chest and nothing of youth was left him.

But he held by the hand a beautiful rosy child of eight—Joël, long ago brought away from the farm on the borders of Brittany where he had been left and cared for, and who now spent the day with his father in the quarry at the top of the hill.

All day and every day Louarn worked on the hill which rose a short distance from the house; a bare hill save for a group or two of stunted oaks whose branches flattened themselves against the ground; and on the summit of which, like a strong-built castle, stood up a ridge of barren rocks cut in half by the road.

There lay the quarry where, seven years earlier, Louarn, in quest of work and tramping across France, had been hired for a week. That week was still going on.

Incapable of learning any skilled handicraft, a labourer condemned to work in which the mind has no share, he hewed the stone in a quarry, open to the sky, cut out of the cliff.

Under the burning sun, in the cold blast of the rushing wind, which explored the hill as a vessel explores an island, the deliberate and regular strokes of Jean Louarn's pickaxe cleaved the red and yellow marble, whose

walls, seen from the road, looked like slices of meat.

The stone was used by the builders of the district; the work was hard, the pay moderate; but, fortunately, stoppages were few.

When, at night-fall, Louarn went down towards the village with the thirty other men employed in the same work, nothing distinguished him from his mates, but perhaps his angular frame and his small head, restless and fierce as a sea-bird's.

The Breton's eyes never lost their look of disquiet in the midst of this land of peaceful hills the storms left unshaken; nowhere could they find a resting-place; not on the crops which bore no resemblance to those of Plœuc, nor on the ponds that shimmered here and there on the plain and brought the memory of the sea too vividly to his mind; nor on the houses in the neighbouring town or the distant villages; for many years of residence had not sufficed for his admittance to their life, and Louarn was still, as he had been from the first, nothing but the chance fellow-labourer, to be tolerated, but always still a stranger, to be distrusted.

One place was as good to him as another and he inspired no interest in any one.

It was long since trouble had become an inmate of his house; but he realized it even more clearly than usual this March evening when he came home to find every one either in tears or screaming with rage.

“More squabbles going on!” he said, peering into the gloom at Baptiste who was picking up his mother’s sabot.

“She neglects her work when I’m out of the house!” screamed the woman; “that’s the sort I hate—a fine lady—a gossip! She’ll never bring you in a halfpenny, Louarn! She hasn’t even taken the trouble to make the soup!”

And for the next five minutes, the loud, coarse voice echoed under the smoke-darkened rafters, while Louarn and the four children stood silent in the dying light and waited till the torrent of abuse the woman was pouring out on the head of the eldest girl should come to an end.

When she had finished: “Beg your mother’s pardon,” said Louarn; “and since the soup’s not made, light the fire, you women; we’ll wait.”

The girl made a gesture of dissent.

“ Beg her pardon ! ” said Louarn again.

There was another pause, and then, with a rush, Noémi burst out with :

“ She’s not my mother ! She detests me ! Maman was called Donatienne ! ”

“ What’s that you’re saying ! ”

With his strong arm, Louarn stopped the termagant as she rushed forward to answer with blows, and finding herself foiled, she turned upon him with violent abuse.

“ You let me be insulted, Louarn ! You take your girl’s part ! I’ve had about enough of your miserable life in this filthy place where we’ve never had anything but poverty and contempt ! Who cares a button for you here ? You never say a word—you don’t answer when you’re spoken to ! You’ve no push in you ! You might as well be everybody’s dog ! I’ve had enough of it ! I’ll go—I’ll quit this hole and the rabble you keep here ! ”

“ Go then ! ” said Louarn, as he released her.

She muttered something to herself, and, instead of going, struck a match and set fire to a bundle of twigs.

And it soothed them all to see the flame

rise and to hear no more noise—all but Louarn, who dared not say more to Noémi for fear of a violent renewal of the woman's fury, but who had drawn Joël to his side, and, as he stroked the child's brown curls felt a pleasure in the caress as if it were being given to the past.

His face had not changed; his bony hand moved lingeringly over the thick lustrous dark locks, edged with gold by the firelight.

Noémi, leaning against the window, appeared to be gazing out into the night, or at the tops of the surrounding poplars, or at the dense pall of scurrying clouds, just touched with a livid light over the sunset.

Louarn was sick at heart; he was thinking of Donatienne.

But it was no longer the young lover-husband who had shed so many tears when Donatienne had gone from the Closerie de Ros Grignon and the land of Plœuc to take service in Paris as wet-nurse. Very far away now was the man who week after week in his anxiety for the little exiled Bretonne had looked for news that came not; the man who had cleared the waste to earn a little more

that he might make the house sweeter for the festival of her return. How far away now was the farmer cut adrift from his land, despoiled of his scanty furniture, sold to pay the proprietor; the tramp without work, without parish, without object, with no thought but of hunger, who had been seen one morning, with his three children, taking the road to the Vendée—the road that leads away from Brittany, and by which the traveller seldom returns.

For many a day now anger had taken love's place; and Louarn had not ceased to think of her, but now it was to accuse her:

“She did it all!” he would say; “wicked woman! Wicked woman!”

He accused her too of having been his ruin, her forsaking of him the cause of the wretched and guilty life he was leading; for faith was not dead in this son of Brittany, and although his conscience was dulled by the long continuance of his sin, he still felt the need of excusing himself in his own eyes and he did so by blaming the absent, the faithless, the worthless, Donatienne.

And in his dark heart as he pondered these things, his grief and his own weakness

mingled in confusion and the phrase most often on his lips was, "I've had no luck!"

Nevertheless, since there is nothing more hidden, even from ourselves, than our real thoughts, Louarn had been pleased to see in Noémi that likeness to the other; in her slender figure, her features like those of a china doll, in the tone of her voice, Noémi greatly resembled Donatienne; but she had not her mother's light-mindedness.

This evening when that name had burst so suddenly into the house of exile, Louarn was even more taciturn than usual.

After supper, while the woman slaked the embers on the hearth, scolding Joël and Baptiste for being so slow in getting to bed in the next room the while, and then going out to lock up the henroost and the rabbit-hutch, he gazed at Noémi and Lucienne bringing in the dried linen from the lines in the garden with a pride he could not have explained to another.

Piece by piece they were folding the sheets and towels and shirts they had thrown in heaps over their left shoulders. It was dark outside; the room was lighted at the end farthest from the door by a little smoking

lamp, and when, in the half-light, Noémi came in loaded, with loosened hair, and laughing because her fourteen years needed joy and created it where none was, Louarn had a distinct vision of her whose name he had just heard afresh.

The memory was so intensely vivid that, for an instant he looked down at his hands, those poor hands that had suffered so much in other days in labouring for the clearing of the waste for the love of Donatienne; and he murmured: "She'll haunt me for ever, I suppose."

"What did you say?" asked the girl, pausing in the folding of a sheet.

As she leant towards him, with her shining eyes upon him, she was so like—so like—that Louarn began to cry.

She longed to tell him the secret, but dared not. . . .

Night put innocence, guilt, anger, ill-feeling, to sleep, and weariness triumphed one by one over these poor creatures a woman's name had troubled.

Noémi, in the back room, in the white wooden bed where she slept with Lucienne, was the last to fall asleep.

She had put under her pillow the slip of paper with her mother's address on it—that far-off mother that she could still see dimly when she thought of her early childhood.

“Maman, I thought you were dead,” she murmured time after time; “and you're alive! I should like to see you again! Oh, how I should like to see you again! But it can't be—that other one would kill you—she's so wicked! Maman Donatienne, if I could have you here—just for a moment—beside my bed—and kiss you! They'd know nothing about it!”

She lay listening to the wind blowing off the plateau on to the plain, at its mysterious task amongst the timbers of the house, the leaves, and making its health-giving way into the ground of the enclosure.

She saw again the man who had appeared at the hedge that afternoon; she said over again the words he had said; she repeated the whole conversation as she used to say her catechism—questions and answers. Where was he now? Of course he must have caught the train to Paris, and now he must be far away, taking with him the secret that he had seen Noémi.

CHAPTER XII
THE RETURN OF SUMMER

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MEANWHILE the man was speeding to Paris ; and he, too, could not sleep. Lying on the seat of a third-class carriage, he thought over what he ought to do.

The memory of Noémi, as she stood erect on the other side of the hedge—so young, so troubled, and then so terribly upset—haunted him, and thinking of her great likeness to Donatienne he swore to himself that they were assuredly mother and daughter.

He wondered what would be the result if he called at Levallois-Perret. If he did, that mother, whom he had seen trembling with passionate emotion, would rush off to la Creuse—nothing would keep her back. Then there would be terrible scenes in the quarryman's house—scenes such as he read of every day in the newspapers under the title of “Dramas of Jealousy.”

The girl was right; Donatienne mustn't go back—that was certain.

But wouldn't it be the best way of preventing strife if he held his tongue?

Anyway, there was no hurry; the mother was pretty well certain her children were alive, and, since she couldn't go back to her husband and them, wasn't it best to leave things as they were?

"Really," he decided at last, "I risk nothing by not going; I owe the woman nothing, and, in fact, I'm saving her from trouble."

He was a cautious fellow and already inclined to regret having got mixed up in the beginning of a quarrel; so he went back to his work and forgot Donatienne.

And summer came once more to France.

It warmed the workmen's district where Donatienne had ceased to expect anything from life, trying to convince herself that that chance customer had never really seen her children. "He deceived me," she thought to herself, "that man, with his talk; or perhaps he saw a Joël that belonged to some one else, and that's why he didn't come back this way."

If she could have discovered where they lived, she felt she might have been capable of making an effort for their sake; but now there was no more chance of finding out, and she was fated to grow old in her wretchedness and weary indifference to everything.

And the sun shines upon the fields of Ros Grignon, where the name of Louarn is now not even a memory; it shines upon the Forest of Plœuc with its masses of swaying foliage. Strayed sea-mews, taking it for the sea because of its billows of living green and the sound of its song, fly towards it, and pause before taking wing for the coasts.

It blazes upon the plain where dwell the poor emigrants from Brittany, and upon the hill with its quarry.

Louarn works at the very top, his feet embedded in a heap of earth and fragments of stone, at the foot of a tall upright wall of yellow stone his pickaxe cleaves. The iron rings upon the stone and rebounds. In the defile the heat is so intense that the labourers' dogs, finding the ground unbearable, have trotted off along the high-road to seek the shade.

The men stay on, since so they earn their living.

Scattered about, they look very small at the foot of the rocks they are carving into slices. From their rock-castle they look over the entire plain, whereon silence reigns, for men and things alike are oppressed by the heat. The world is almost as soundless as if it were snowbound; only the ringing of the iron picks, monotonous and shrill as the grasshopper's chirp—drops down into the lower land.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when a terrible cry shivered these small sounds of the quarry, and people scattered about at the foot of the hill, turning round, saw a cloud of dust arise, such as issues from a barn when wheat is being threshed inside.

Then half-a-dozen quarrymen appeared at the side of the road which crossed the quarry on its way down to the villages.

They were making signs, and several were shouting confused and indistinguishable words; and, lying on a stretcher, they were carrying a man, apparently unconscious and covered with blood.

They were shouting for cold water and linen; but no one came near and they went on downwards.

In the light, the face of the wounded man looked of a chalky whiteness, and to protect it, one of the quarrymen had plucked a couple of fern leaves by the wayside and laid them over it; they swayed to and fro with the movements of the stretcher.

Not a man spoke. The quarrymen, the wounded man's daily mates, grouped at the top of the hill, watched the tragic descent, and tears, mingled with sweat, fell from the eyes of the rough-faced carriers.

When they reached the shade at the bottom of the slope, they turned to the right, opened the little gate and went into the Louarns' enclosure.

From each side of it came a woman's scream, and Noémi, with outstretched arms, and Louarn's companion, with a bitter oath, rushed towards the bearers.

"What is it? Tell me! Is he dead?"

"Be off, Noémi; go and turn down his bed!"

"Oh, he can't speak! He can't see!"

Oh, look how he's bleeding ! Father !
Father ! ”

Putting aside both the girl, and the woman who was screaming : “ It's only to us things like this happen ! It always falls upon us ! ” the bearers passed by the cabbage-bed, and entering the front room, laid their comrade on the bed near the window. The reflection of the serge curtains sent a greenish light over Louarn's face.

“ He's dead, isn't he ? ” said Noémi. Two elderly labourers who were standing still, stupefied and weary, took their eyes from the poor victim, to say :

“ I don't think so—he's still breathing.”

A young fellow with a pointed, pale face and a small turned-up moustache, stepped aside to Noémi, saying :

“ I've got a bike near here, Mam'selle Noémi ; I'll go for the doctor. If there's any hope, he'll tell you. It won't take me more than three quarters of an hour, and I won't loiter on the way, never fear ! ”

And as she stooped to listen if there were still signs of breath, he went on :

“ This is how it happened : great heat

splits the stone sometimes; Louarn had no time to get out of the way, and it fell upon his legs right from the top of the quarry—half-a-dozen yards perhaps. I picked him up; he was almost buried under it. He only gave one cry, with his eyes wide open, and then he shut them as they are now and he hasn't stirred since, no more than if he was dead. That's correct, isn't it, mates ? ”

He nodded a farewell, pulled his hat over his eyes and went for the doctor.

The other labourers confirmed his account, biting their lips at the sound of Noémi, Lucienne, and the two little boys standing together by the door of the inner room, crying and calling for their father. And one after the other they said, as if it were an explanation and a consolation :

“ It's the sort of work that's to blame. Some folk have no luck. Poor Louarn ! ”

And soon they went, all but one, the oldest of them, who stayed to help the woman undress the unconscious man.

Blood was flowing from a score of places down from his stomach to below his knees—gaping holes, bruises, cuts made by the

bursting of the compressed skin, and powdered with chips of stone, dust and bits of his clothing.

As night fell, a carriage drew up outside on the road. Louarn had awakened from his long faint, and for the last two hours had never ceased moaning.

Two women were watching him, but the woman who had lived with him for seven years was not one of them. They were two women from the village who had come up on hearing of the accident; but she herself, maddened and irritated by the ceaseless moaning, waited outside, watching for the doctor, guessing at the rounds he must be making in the town, and appearing at the door only to repeat with hands clutching at her head: "I can't hear him coming!" and then rushing out again.

It was she who opened the gate to admit a stout, short, quick-spoken man, who had never before been in this part of the district and had lost his way.

"No easy task to find you, my good woman! A place only fit for savages! Where is he?"

“In there—can’t you hear him?”

The doctor entered the room lighted up by the fire on the hearth, for the potatoes were being cooked for supper. The flames leapt higher than the frame of the bed whereon lay the wounded man, and the doctor perceived a thin, clean-shaven, contorted face, and a pair of eyes shining in the light like luminous cones and at times rolling upwards out of sight, while from his lips issued the persistent moaning, filling the room and escaping into the warm, harvest-scented night.

La Louarn went backwards and forwards, repeating under her breath: “Monsieur le Médecin, is he going to die?”

At the end of an hour, the doctor, who had taken no notice of her question, stood upright, and, as if he had only just heard it, answered:

“No, I think he’ll live; but he’ll never use his legs again.”

The woman came up to him, with haggard face and stooping body, moved to insult by suffering, that supreme test of character.

“What’s that you say? You can’t mend him?”

“Not entirely,” said the doctor awk-

wardly, glancing at his hands and looking round for a basin and soap.

“ It’s all up, then ! Who’s going to keep us now ? Do you know there are four children in the house ? If we were rich folk you’d manage to get him out of the scrape fast enough ! It’s all up, I say ! What do you suppose I’m to do with a cripple ? ”

The doctor took hold of a towel one of the village women held out to him, and made no answer.

Then, ignoring the woman who had first spoken, he gave various directions to the others, and promised to call again, without fixing any particular day, as is the way of doctors when they foresee a lengthy and incurable malady.

He crossed the little garden alone, but at the far end, a slender figure rose out of the darkness and Noémi asked : “ Monsieur, is it really true that he’ll never be able to work again ? ”

The big man, as he stumbled over the ground, tired after his day’s work and the hour he had just passed inside the house and room whose vitiated air seemed to be trying

to leave his garments and disperse into the night, started and stopped short ready to make some rough answer. But at the sound of the voice and the sight of Noémi's slender shadowy outline against the whiteness of the gate, he realized that this was one of the children of the wounded man—the poor wretch under sentence.

“My child,” he answered, “I’m afraid it’s you who’ll have to work for him now.”

“I’ve thought of that already,” said the voice; “I shall soon be fourteen. I’ll take a situation, and send home the money I earn. I’m very strong.”

The doctor gazed at the slim apparition. “And the younger ones?” he asked.

“Lucienne will look after them. She and I settled all that just now.”

“I’ll come again to-morrow without fail,” said the man, as he opened the gate; “I’ll come about noon.”

He walked a few paces along the road at the edge of which his horse, purposely loosely tied, was cropping the grass; for five minutes the carriage lamp flickered between the roadside oaks, and then disappeared.

Very early the next day, when Noémi got up after a bad night, she peeped through the door between the two rooms.

The moaning, which had ceased during part of the night, had begun again, but feebler and with gasps of exhaustion, and the girl saw that her father wanted something to drink.

The women from the village had left about eleven o'clock at night, promising to return, but had not yet come.

Noémi jumped out of bed, put on a short petticoat, and gave the sick man—fever-smitten and oppressed—a little milk. Perhaps he recognized his daughter, but he did not smile at her.

She fancied the danger had increased, but the fire must be lighted all the same as usual, to add to the heat of the already too hot room and to worry the sick man with the blazing of the wood.

Noémi went outside to get some turf from the place where it was stored near the rabbit-hutches, thinking it would make less flame.

No doubt the woman who was called La

Louarn must have had the same idea, since she was not in the room.

The child came back with some lumps of turf without meeting the woman and lighted the fire.

Just as the cocks began to crow the women from the village came in.

“Where’s your mother, my dear?” they asked.

“Perhaps she’s gone to the village,” said Noémi; “for I’ve seen nothing of her since I got up.”

“Oh, no!” said one of the women; “the shops aren’t open yet.”

“Then she may be gone up to the quarry,” said Noémi; “for father’s tools were left there, and she can’t bear anything to be lost.”

The doctor came and dressed the wounds afresh; then left the house, shaking his head and with words that promised little good. But La Louarn did not make her appearance neither at noon for the midday meal, nor at two o’clock nor at three.

The father grew weaker and delirious; Joël and Lucienne, sent to the quarry, and

then to the village, for news, brought back words that nobody had seen La Louarn.

One of the women in attendance on the sick man—a stout woman with a moustache—said: “Perhaps she’s killed herself.”

“Oh, no!” said the other; “when she heard he was so bad, she looked quite wild, and I saw plain enough she wasn’t thinking about him but about herself. I don’t want to upset you, my little Noémi, but I believe she won’t come back again.”

“Don’t say so to the children,” said Noémi simply.

The woman was amazed that she did not cry. But as night came on, the younger ones began to be uneasy. Lucienne and Joël, who believed themselves to be the woman’s children, cried as they asked where she was, and Baptiste, at sight of their tears, ran about the house with them calling out: “Where are you, Maman! Maman, where are you?”

And while they kept awake, the children were as much troubled as is possible at eleven, eight or six years of age.

It was Noémi who sat up with her father from midnight till dawn.

She felt herself quite alone in the darkness, so full of dreams, and fears, and plans.

They beset her as they had beset her forbears in other days amid the fields of buckwheat and gorse; as they had frightened, comforted and deluded another young woman very like herself, keeping long watches over cradles; and as they had beset even the poor emaciated wretch, consumed by fever, twice forsaken and who, too, had once known youth and dreamed dreams in nights of wakefulness.

His sleep was broken by shudderings and plaints and phantoms of fever.

She gazed at him, at times thinking he was speaking to her, then realizing that he was wandering.

When she was not looking at him, she thought of the morrow, and when her eyes returned to his face, her thoughts went back to her childhood and far-off things.

And perchance, amongst those far-off things each found the other, travellers pursuing the same memories, unseen of each other, uncertain of their nearness.

One wandered in delirium while the other mused, her small head supported by her

hands, the candle between her and her father.

Sometimes she murmured words to herself to break the utter loneliness and the wailing of the wind as, emboldened by the silence, it roamed around the house.

Poor father ! She had no memory of his face as it was while he was still young ; but she remembered the house on the top of a little hill, and the bright light round about it, and the darkness inside it, and the cow whose pretty head appeared when you opened the door at the end of the room, and Joël's cradle which she herself, as a little child, had rocked by the help of a cord.

She gathered all these memories together with others that represented her past happiness, and then she began to wonder if her father might not, too, keep similar happy memories of those days ; she felt sure he must.

He looked as if he were asleep, but he was evidently in pain.

Then, as if she longed to send a message to the soul imprisoned behind that impenetrable mask—the soul enmeshed in the nightmare of

pain—with set lips and gentle voice, into the silent room she spoke one clear word :

“ Donatienne ! ”

She waited; no life came back to the fevered face; neither joy nor sorrow greeted the long-silent name.

A second time the name of the mother she loved, the wife he had once loved, trembled into the night.

The wounded man's eyelids fluttered feebly upwards, enough for Noémi to receive the impression of a look, of an answer sent from the sick and wandering spirit.

The look seemed to her full of reproach, and the next moment she thought the trembling lips murmured : “ Be silent ; don't speak to me of my bitterest sorrow ! ”

And then the man's whole being slipped back into the obsession of suffering, with closed eyes and hollowed cheeks, and livid patches at the corners of the distorted mouth.

Noémi sat and thought.

At break of day when through the chinks in the shutters came the first rays of light, like a sprinkling of hoar-frost, she went to the window which looked out towards the poplars

and the fields, and leaning on the wooden sill, her back to her father, lest he might surprise her secret, she began to write.

Very slowly, not for want of words, but for want of skill to form them, the eldest of the Louarn children wrote her letter to "Madame Donatienne" at the address the passer-by had given her.

She waited till the sun rose, then stopping the egg-dealer as he went by, she gave him the letter to post in the box at the station on the plateau.

The man reined in the lean horse he had pushed into a trot.

"It shall be done, my dear," he said.

He spelt out the address, which gave him no surprise, since he came from a distance and felt no interest in these Louarns, common people whose garden was just a blot on the road his cart travelled.

But Noémi had blushed as she gave him the letter, as if it had been a love-letter.

All her hopes and all her dreams were enclosed in that small envelope, on which the big, careful writing said: "*À Madame Donatienne,*" and while she watched the

covered cart diminish and disappear, she tried to imagine what would happen.

How long would the letter take to arrive ? Not long, she supposed.

Though Noémi had never set foot in a train, she had seen them pass, and she knew they all went to Paris, with their clouds of white smoke upon their backs, and so fast—so fast !

Where would her mother be ? In some house that Noémi pictured to herself like those in the market town. Donatienne would be standing in a brick-laid porch ; she would be knitting like the women in the village ; she would open the letter and say :

“ It is from my child Noémi ! There has been an accident at home ! ”

But after that Noémi could imagine nothing more, and she fell a prey to distress and anxiety which increased as the day went on.

Towards the evening these became so intense that, weary of suffering without complaint, and more weary still with the sight and sound of the sick man's sufferings, she left the two kind women who were watch-

ing him, for a little while, and beckoned to Lucienne and Joël.

“Where are we going?” said Lucienne softly when they were outside.

Noémi laid a finger on her lips.

The children followed her, Lucienne fair and rosy, but not so delicately made or vivid as her sister; Joël with his curly head, and wearing a pair of breeches held to his shoulder by a single brace.

Walking in single file, they reach the road and turn to the right where the ground begins to rise.

The three young creatures mount the hill, the heart of one full of trouble like a woman's, the others a little sorry, like children.

They do not speak; Joël eats blackberries from the dust-laden hedges. They can hear the sound of the quarrymen's picks, for work goes on as usual, only without the man who but yesterday was hurt.

The oak-trees are more stunted and scattered on the slope, where stone crops up everywhere.

The path is hard to climb. Noémi crosses the quarry from end to end, and some of the

quarrymen standing on invisible ledges of the rock they are cleaving and looking a part of it, call out from the distance :

“ Hi ! little Noémi ! Is *le père Louarn* any better ? ”

She shakes her small head, held a little high and haughtily, and goes on without stopping ; she cannot speak—her heart is too full.

She goes through the narrow pass where the path is but a notch cut out of the wall of rock, and beyond which the hill slopes downwards to the north, clothed with broom and fern.

Now she is out of sight of all save Lucienne and Joël, wondering and asking, “ Where are we going ? ”

But she goes on to a bit of rising ground at the side of the road giving a wide outlook over the whole landscape. Many a time has Noémi cast pebbles from here into the valley beneath, the deep valley filled with swaying tree-tops ; many a time has she lingered there gazing at the immense stretch of fallows, of wheat and lucerne in the meadows, and the changing pageant of the sky above them.

To-day she has no eyes but for the plateau

rising to the north above the narrow valley, and for the ribbon of road the eye can follow on it—twisting, disappearing, reappearing, till it is lost in the general view where everything seems to mingle in dust-like confusion.

It is the high-road leading from the unseen station on the heath—the road along which come the few travellers who have any business in the district.

The two younger children have followed Noémi on to the hillock. The level light of the declining day mellows the whole expanse.

“ Can you see any one on the road ? ” asks Noémi.

“ I can see a flock of sheep and a shepherd ; but they’re very far off. Will the doctor come that way ? ”

“ It’s our mother,” says Noémi.

“ She’s run away—why, you know that ! ” says Lucienne ; and she lifts her sunburnt face with its ruffled locks gilded by the sun to the delicate face, so full of trouble, of her elder sister, who answers :

“ The one that is coming is the real one.”

She speaks softly, her eyes fixed on the distance, and so gravely that the two younger

ones take the truth of what she says for granted, and themselves begin to watch the high-road for the mother who is to come along it.

“Is she old?” asks Lucienne, as Noémi herself had done; and she answers: “Not at all old. She *must* come; if not we shall be ruined, my darlings——”

They have no real comprehension of what she means, but it touches them, and their eyes fill with tears.

Night is falling; the road grows grey—grey to the very end; there is no one on it; the mother does not come.

The children grow weary of their watch, and begin to finger the plants and stones; but Noémi, standing alone, one side of her face lighted up by the paling sunset, clasps her hands under her apron and whispers to the wind that breathes from the shadows: “Come back! Come back!”

Now the lower valley is quite hidden in the twilight, which even on the plateau has merged the road into the waste around; and Noémi turns away. Her face is so sad that the children, from either side looking up at

her, take each a hand to comfort her, and so they return to the house.

The quarrymen have gone home; the day is done; Louarn's fever has not abated; the women declare he can't live.

The next day, once more Noémi, with Lucienne and Joël, kept her watch from the hillock on the top of the hill; but the expected traveller did not appear. And, on the fourth day, little Noémi gave up hope and went up there no more.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MOTHER

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THE MOTHER

THAT fourth day the little Louarns gave up going to the quarry-hill; yet, on that very day, a woman was journeying towards them.

It was only that morning she had received the letter, the egg-dealer having put it in his pocket and forgotten to post it.

A stranger, travelling a strange country, bent double, her head in her hands, or squeezed into a corner of a third-class carriage, she was coming.

One thought absorbed her to the exclusion of all else: "In what fashion should she first show herself to them; how should she answer when they asked, 'Where have you been, Maman'? They would never believe her if she said: 'I loved you all the same.'"

To be disbelieved, or despised sooner or later by the children she had borne; to take home with her her seven-years'-old sin, and

to feel it ever present when they kissed her forehead ! To live between this remorse and her husband's possible vengeance and certain reproaches ! To go back to the old poverty aggravated by illness ! To bury herself once more under the old duties, grown greater now, and herself bereft of that early youth which is so great a help and encouragement ! What a future ! And it was to all this she was going ! Why had she started, she asked herself ; she could not explain it.

“ How could I do it ? I'm only going back to more wretchedness—always more ! always more ! ”

The train had been travelling for hours ; the sun blazed upon the seat where she sat huddled. Now it was declining ; its rays fell aslant like wheat spilt from the ear ; but she saw and felt nothing but her own trouble.

Yes—how had she come to make up her mind so suddenly ? Over and over again her mind went over the events of the morning.

What time had it been ? Half-past seven—that or a little later, perhaps. She had been going out to do her marketing ; she had put on her straw hat against her usual custom,

which was to go out bareheaded in the neighbourhood. The postman had come in—a letter in an unknown handwriting. She had opened it—read it—fortunately no customer had arrived; she could kiss the page ten—twenty, times.

It's Noémi who has written that letter! She pleads for help, neither doubting nor arguing about it; she only pleads for help!

She *must* go. She must see once more her first-born child, Noémi, who is so like herself; she must once more press her children to her breast, hold them tight—all three of them round her, their arms round her neck.

And this vision of maternal delight had been so vivid that Donatienne had run up again into her bedroom, opened the wardrobe, and from the top shelf taken a parcel sewn up in a napkin and grey with accumulated dust.

“What are you looking for, Donatienne? Why have you come back?”

Bastien Laray was still half-asleep.

“Nothing, go to sleep again; I'm going to the linen-draper's.”

Then she had hurried downstairs, taken the key of the till, and put all the money she found

there in her pocket. Wouldn't he get all the rest? Oh, no! she wasn't robbing him—quite the contrary; she was leaving him much more than his due.

Then, half crazy with both joy and fear, she had taken the local train and then the central main line.

And now, stronger and stronger grew her reluctance to reach the end of her journey; she felt as if she were being hurried into an abyss.

The dread grew and grew as that end came nearer, and she recoiled from her first impulse, like a man on his way to give himself up to justice, who recoils and turns back at the last minute.

She did not dream of returning to Paris; all that was done with; she was freed from slavery; but why rush to something similar? It would be so easy to get out at this station or that, near some village, perhaps; she would always be able to find work enough to keep herself.

Donatienne knew there could be but few stoppages now before the final one, for the day was coming to an end; the air was

golden; amongst the tufts of withered asphodel, upon the plateau with its heather and pastures, gleamed the ponds, streaked with rays of light between their purpling banks, broken here and there by a bent reed.

It was the final splendour of the sun, the hour that must see her arrival.

Three times, as the train drew up, the traveller's hand had lifted the parcel from the seat, and she had risen, determined to alight at some spot which held, at least, no greater terror for her than that of the unknown.

But something stronger than fear made her give up the idea of flight; three times, like the voice of the sea from unseen caverns, the names of Noémi, and Lucienne, and Joël sounded in her ears.

She thought of what Noémi had said in the letter she had hidden in her bosom: "We are in trouble; to-day father's legs were crushed; he is moaning; perhaps he is going to die; anyhow he will never be able to work in the quarry again. Oh, Maman! if you get my letter, come back for his sake and for Noémi's."

She sat down again and summoned strength to go on to the next station.

The sun was going down; the train drew up, and the guard called out the name of the village Noémi had given in her letter.

It had come.

One woman only got out, her parcel in her hand; the train rumbled away. When it had disappeared, she asked her way, and being told it, did not move, looking so white that the station-master asked her if she were ill. She shook her head; it was only that she felt herself incapable of moving or carrying her load of trouble further.

Puzzled, the man let her alone.

So she stood for several minutes; then without further argument with herself for or against her decision, without any inner consciousness of a struggle and a victory, she took that first step which meant the acceptance of her fate.

Some mysterious process of the will; action unrelated to the present time and whose causes dated from old days; but the smallest sacrifice, however poorly, however tardily accepted, is a renewal of the soul.

No sooner had Donatienne crossed the platform than she felt more strength within her;

she went on her way to the left, repeating :
“ It’s to see you again, my three little ones ! ”
and her heart grew lighter with a kind of joy in suffering for their sake.

She hurried on ; in front of her she caught sight of the edge of the plateau, and lying under the crimson dust of sunset, the vast plain into which she must go down.

It must be done.

At some distance from the station, no one to be seen on the road, she opened the parcel in its linen cover, took out the finely-pleated, velvet-edged black dress she had worn of old when she went to Paris, also three muslin caps, three of the Plœuc caps like cyclamen-flowers, and chose one, though the stuff was yellow and crumpled.

Then, going through a gate into a field, she put on once more the old Breton costume, and wrapped up the town-made dress in the napkin. “ They’ll know me better, so,” she thought.

Then she walked on again, listening to the soft beat of the linen wings of the cap upon her temples.

Donatienne crossed the plateau and went

down upon the plain, which but now she had scanned with terror, trying to make out the house to which she was bound. She had made up her mind to enter it.

She climbed the first hill, where stood the rocky cliffs of the quarry, and beyond which unknown to her lay the little enclosure; she was new to the country.

To give herself courage she wondered if her children would recognize her and which of the three would do so first.

In the dying light the quarrymen were still at work; she could hear the sound of their picks.

There was a child playing by the road-side, heaping stones into pyramids.

It was Baptiste, of whom the quarrymen had taken charge since the accident, bringing him with them in the morning, and rewarding him with a basin of soup for doing errands for them in the village below.

As Donatienne passed him, she said, " Good evening, little one."

" Good evening, Madame."

" Can you tell me, is it far to Jean Louarn's house ? "

He turned his square-cut face with its bright eyes, alight with vitality, where the sea-dreams of Brittany had no place, towards her.

“ Oh, no ! ” he said, “ not at all far. It’s the first house at the bottom of the hill,” and as she gazed downwards into the darkening valley; “ I can take you there,” the boy went on. “ It’s my home; I’m a Louarn.”

“ You ? That can’t be true ! ”

“ Not true ! I say, you men, am I not a Louarn—Baptiste Louarn. She won’t believe me ! ”

Loud voices, echoing from the cliffs, answered : “ Yes ! you can believe him ! He’s the son of one of our mates.”

And as the child watched her face to see what she would say, it turned so white that it reminded him of his sick father’s.

Donatienne understood;—it was the child of another woman who was the first to greet her.

Then, from the depths of the past of her race, from the depths of her own past, a cry went up to God. In the anguish of her heart, among the trees, her eyes unconsciously

sought a cross before which to pour out her poor petition—a cross such as stands at all the cross-roads in Brittany; but she looked in vain.

She reflected for a moment, then some strength returning to her, she looked down at the child.

“Baptiste Louarn,” she said, “is your mother at home?”

“No, Madame; they say she won’t come back again.”

“Who says so?”

“My sisters, and the women from the village.”

Donatienne took the child’s hand.

“Show me the way, my child. They’re wrong. Your mother *has* come back, for here I am.”

He did not understand her, but together, side by side they went down the hill.

The child pointed out the roof of the house amongst the poplar-trunks; but she took no notice. With staring eyes uplifted, and lips a-quiver as they breathed the air, Donatienne was saying: “I want to die; help me to bear life!”

Baptiste scarcely heard her, for she spoke low; but he fancied she said Noémi's name; so he said: "She's coming; when my big sister sees me, she always comes to meet me."

As he spoke, they reached the bottom of the hill and could see the Louarns' quickset hedge with the quivering leaves of the poplars above it. The gate was open. It was the hour when the land falls silent, drinking in the twilight and its coolness.

Baptiste whistled two notes, and in the half-light at the end of the garden, an alert young head appeared at the door in answer to the call. She was about to smile—to speak; then suddenly she checked herself and seemed about to draw back. Her eyes grew big, for, close to Baptiste, she had caught sight of a woman leaning on the gate—a woman slender, and still young, and pale, and whose cap was quite unlike those of the women of the district.

For a second Noémi hesitated; then she found strength to make no outcry, but ran out, silent, brave, with eyes uplifted to greet her happiness.

She was quite sure; her heart, quicker than her eyes, had recognized her mother.

That mother awaited her coming, making no movement.

And when Noémi came up to her, she still stood erect, with closed eyes weighed down by both sorrow and joy, and let the girl's arms fold her round while she listened to her speaking those long-yearned-for words :

“ Maman ! Maman Donatienne ! ”

But, intense as was the joy, her sense of unworthiness put it to flight.

“ Maman Donatienne, Papa is better since the morning—he's conscious and the fever is lessened. Ah, Maman, I had left off hoping you'd come ! ”

There was no one to listen to the low speech of the one or the weeping of the other.

Night had almost fallen ; all was silence in the garden, still some one might come. The mother loosened the embracing arms, held the girl away from her in spite of her attempts to renew the embrace and the low talk, and, nervously laying her fingers upon Noémi's lips in her agonized dread of being questioned ; “ Don't ask me anything,” she said ; “ I have always kept you in my heart, my dear children

—always. I've come back for your sake. Take me in."

The girl took her mother's hand, buoyant, anxious and proud at once, and with lifted head, led her past the beds of cabbage and the pond and into the house.

The lamp in the room had not been lighted, and all the light there was came from a faint glimmer through the window, which fell aslant upon the man's bed and was lost in the growing darkness.

The two women were sitting by the window; Joël and Lucienne were playing on the bare ground in the dark. The sick man was dozing.

When Donatienne came in behind Noémi, no one noticed her and she went up to the bed unseen. Louarn's sleeping head was in shadow; his wife's faintly lighted by the dying beam. The women whispered to each other: "Who is it?"

The wings of the linen cap bent over the sick man; Donatienne looked at Louarn, and this woman, who had sinned and suffered, felt pity now at last. She gazed upon his face, emaciated, tortured, aged, worn by grief

and work—the face her going had created—and her lips trembled.

Noémi, who had drawn a little back, but still near enough to keep her hold on the finely-pleated skirt, breathed one word into the silent room.

“ Maman ! ”

The man's eyelids unclosed and out of the depths of sleep and oblivion his soul rose slowly into his eyes; at first, affrighted at the vision of a Breton cap, they turned away, then came back to it tremulously, and at last glistened with each a falling tear. He had shed so many before that these fell all the quicker.

“ Is it you, Donatienne ? ”

“ Yes, it's me.”

Their voices were as faint as the light. Louarn's eyes seemed to deepen as if a way were opening into the hidden anguish of his soul.

“ How long you've been in coming ! ” he said; “ and now I've nothing but misery to give you.”

She was about to answer, but his eyes closed once more and his head fell back

sideways on the pillow, inert and overcome by sleep.

Donatienne turned round towards the middle of the room; she was breathing quickly like one near weeping. The two village women had drawn near. Noémi led Lucienne and Joël up to her, struggling and hanging back, saying in vain to them: "It's Maman—the real one, I tell you." She was a stranger to them and they were afraid of her; and when Donatienne had kissed them, they escaped and crept back into the shadow.

Then, as she stood beside the bed whence she had not moved, she said: "Get me a light, children."

When the lamp was set upon the table in the middle of the room it could be seen that the little Bretonne had not been able to restrain her tears, but that she was resolved not to give way completely. As she stood up by Noémi she looked like a rather taller sister—a sister who was in trouble. She gave a great sigh.

"Noémi," she said gently, "isn't it time to get supper ready?"

"Yes, Maman."

Donatienne paused for a moment as if her next words were difficult to say.

“ Give me the sabots that belonged to that woman who is gone.”

“ Yes, Maman.”

“ I will go and draw the water, and make the soup for all four of you.”

And having put on the other woman's sabots, she set to work.

THE END

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